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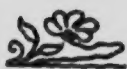
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GAFF LINKUM

A Tale of Talbotville

BY

ARCHIE P. McKISHNIE



TORONTO
WILLIAM BRIGGS
1907

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GAFF LINKUM.

CHAPTER I.

THE SEARCH PARTY.

JACEY CREATION, Esquire, Postmaster of the village of Talbotville, laid aside the pile of letters he was assorting, and turned to answer deaf Simon Diggs' question for the fifth time.

Putting his face as close to the pigeon-hole as its framework would allow, he shouted:

"They're organizing a search-party for those boys. They're lost."

"Hey!" cried Mr. Diggs. "What's that you say? Who's lost?"

He kept his ear strained at attention, but an answer was not forthcoming. Jacey Creation, Esquire and Postmaster, was a busy man, a man of importance, and one much respected on account of the vast amount of knowledge he was thought to possess—thought to possess, because it had never been proven. But he had a dignified mien, a superiority of manner that carried weight with his townspeople. He never lost an argument; not in all his long career as Postmaster and dispenser of groceries had he been downed. He had a way more powerful than facts of besting

his man. It was a smile of commingled derision and superiority, with a dash of contempt in the corners. All argument was suspended when he smiled.

Had he not been under a slight obligation to Mr. Diggs, proprietor of the Commercial Hotel, it is doubtful if he would have descended from his dignity even so far as he had in order to enlighten the old man. As it was, he had done enough already to awaken a stir of wonderment among the villagers who happened to be present. He threw down a blue envelope and waved Mr. Diggs majestically aside.

"Nothing for you," he said to a small man with untrimmed beard and clothes smelling of tar and fish.

"I was expecting an epistle." The voice was high-pitched and wheezy.

"Nothing," said Mr. Creation shortly, waving him an invitation to fall back.

"I think it probable there is a paper."

"No paper."

"Perhaps it would be well to investigate a little further."

"Perhaps you had better come inside and show me how to do my business, Mr. Shipley."

The listeners laughed, and Mr. Shipley moved foolishly away. A long, bony man, sitting on a barrel and cutting tobacco off a twist of Canada Green, motioned Mr. Shipley over to his side.

"Corker, isn't he?" he remarked, looking admiringly toward the pigeon-hole. "He's got a sharp tongue, Jack."

Jack nodded, and reached out his hand for the twist.

"He's a very much overrated person," he responded,

"not well balanced, not well balanced, Benjamin—ahem!—all vulgarity—no refinement to speak of."

"You might have giv' him a setback when he opened up on you. You claim as you kin beat him in sarcasm, Jack?"

"Probably—probably I might have done so, Benjamin, but there are sometimes obstacles that debar us from working our dearest pleasures." Shipley cast a furtive glance toward the wicket. "The reason I did not retaliate is that I owe a bill in this shop, and Mr. Creation will not be retaliated unto by a debtor."

"Well, he'll make you pay good interest on what you owe him, er my name's not Ben Sward."

"Probably, probably," rejoined Mr. Shipley, meekly, as he filled his pipe.

"Now, I deal with Dustband 'cross the way," said Sward. "He don't look right through you inter your pocket whenever you come in and happen to owe a little bill. He shakes hands with you and asks how's business."

"Dustband don't like me a some reason, Benjamin."

Sward chuckled.

"It's because you know so much, Jack; that's the reason. You're too much of a scholar fer him."

"I admit that, I admit that," responded Shipley, with conceited frankness; "but if I am well learned, am I proud? I ask you, Benjamin, can any man or woman in Talbotville say that John D. Shipley, fisherman on Lake Erie, is proud?"

"They kin not, Jack."

"Dustband says that I look like a piece of tarred

rope and smell worse than a red herring. How do you account for that?"

The other shook his head.

"You allers looked and smelled all right to me, Jack," he said, after some thought. "Bill Dustband's a great joker. He's a mighty fine feller, too, when he ain't drinkin'."

"He's a tolerable drinker, though," rejoined the other.

"They say thet little blind Dorothy thinks the world and all of him, and since he's took her under his charge he don't drink like he used t'," said Sward.

"That being the case, I might venture again to his store, Benjamin. The last time I entered it I was forcibly ejected."

"You mean as he refused to give you trust?"

"I mean, Benjamin, that I was thrown out into the street."

"Well, well, you don't say! Was it by Dustband?"

"Yes. He's a strong man, is Dustband."

"They do say thet him an' Ed. Goosecall be the two strongest men in the county. There they be now, outside, in Goosecall's buckboard. You wouldn't think, t' see 'em now, thet once they had a fight as lasted fer two hours, would you, Jack?"

"They seem friendly enough now," agreed Shipley. "Quite a crowd outside! They seem excited. Guess it's over those boys."

"They've been missin' two days and two nights," said Sward. "Likely they're going to get up a crowd to search fer 'em."

"Like as not the young beggars will be in hiding behind some brush-heap, laughing up their sleeves at

all the excitement they're creating," chuckled Shipley. "Well, I declare! It's getting dark, and it's only three o'clock. Must be going to rain."

The two fishermen passed out, Mr. Shipley limping with dignity in the lead. At the door they met Mr. Creation coming in.

"I hope, sir, to soon be in a position to discharge my little indebtedness to you."

Mr. Shipley, retaining his dignity, bowed stiffly to the Postmaster.

"Thank you, that's something," replied that gentleman, calmly surveying Mr. Shipley over his glasses.

"Take your time, my dear sir. Old methods are often the best, you know. Besides, surprises are sometimes fatal to men of my age."

He smiled, and stroked his long, dyed beard complacently as he noted Mr. Shipley squirm.

"Benjamin, some men would consider such words as he addressed to me an insult," remarked Mr. Shipley, after they had reached the street. "But I don't. Knowing Mr. Creation as I do, I might say—ahem!—intimately, as it were, I attribute his recent reply to my assurance of the liquidation of the small debt I owe him to his unequalled originality. His words were meant to convey to me solely the idea that he felt no uneasiness; neither was I to allow such a small matter as this debt to cloud my horizon."

"I can't say as I foller you exactly, Jack, not bein' very well acquainted with your scholarly words, but I think I understan' what you mean, all right. What you mean is, Creation is scared that he won't get his money, and he chooses to be mean about it, eh? Well, if it was me, I'm jiggered if I wouldn't take th' ole

chap's advice and stick t' th' custom of paying him in promises. Ha! ha!"

Mr. Shipley cast a look of commiseration upon his friend, but before he could frame the words he would speak, a tall, thin man came rushing up, and waving his arms to command silence, shouted:

"A man from the beach has just brought word that a drifting skiff was picked up a mile out in the lake this afternoon."

The newcomer lifted his straw hat and mopped his streaming brow.

"Any of *their* people here?" he asked, looking quickly about him.

"Fields' mother just went away," someone answered. "Fields' gone with the search party. Dick Dashmore was here a moment ago, asking about Gaff, but he's gone up to the hotel."

"What is it, Mr. Malcolm?" asked a dapper little man, clad in a cheap suit of gray, with side-burns cut square with the corners of his mouth, his fingers toying nervously with the black music-portfolio he carried, as he asked the question.

"It's this, Casteel," answered the other, drawing the little man to one side, and bending his tall form so that the one addressed could catch his low words. "A boat has been picked up adrift in the lake. They found Buz's hat floating alongside her."

He straightened up and focussed his bright blue eyes on the other's face.

"They're both drowned, poor chaps. They're drowned. They've been pretty bad boys, one way and another, but, oh, my, it's awful to think of it!"

THE SEARCH PARTY

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He blew his nose—it was a big nose—on a red silk handkerchief. His eyes were swimming.

"I'm sorry, Casteel, but you or somebody else must tell their folks. I can't. I'm too Irish."

"What's he whisperin' t' th' little singin' master, d'yer suppose?" asked Sward of his companion.

"I did not catch his words, exactly," answered Shipley. "I heard him say 'boat,' but that is rather vague, almost inconsistent. Did you catch a word or two?"

"I heard him call Casteel an Irishman," answered Sward. "Casteel isn't Irish. He's a Welshman. He's as full of music as Malcolm is of blarney."

Just here the dapper little man climbed on an empty barrel, and addressed the people who were gathered about.

"It is feared that the two boys who have been missing, and for whom a party of our townsmen are now searching, have met with—have met with—"

Here he stopped and glanced imploringly at Mr. Malcolm. That gentleman came over and whispered in his ear, merely standing on his tip-toes to do so.

Casteel nodded, and waved his hand.

"Have met with accident," he continued. "Who present will volunteer to carry the news to their poor loved ones?"

The sad intelligence fell like a thunderclap on those assembled. The women sobbed, the men groaned.

"Where is Bill Dustband?" asked a voice. "He is the man to do this sad errand."

"He has gone with the search-party, too," some one answered. "They started nearly half an hour ago."

"Then, ladies and gentlemen," spoke a high, shrill voice, with a wheeze running through it, "let the burden of this dread time be borne by me."

Shipley had climbed up beside Mr. Casteel. His pipe had gone out, which bespoke for him a grief that had indeed settled heavily. "I will bear the sad tidings to the bereaved ones," he said; then, nobody offering sympathy in his trial, he scratched a match upon his tar-coated trousers, lit his pipe, climbed down from his perch, and vanished.

"There goes a grand, good man," said Benjamin Sward to a bystander.

Suddenly a few heavy drops of rain fell splashing upon the dusty road. A big, ominous cloud crept up over the steeple of the village church. The maples bent before the wind that heralded the coming storm. Then the lightning tore a ragged rent across the mantle of clouds, and with the crash that followed the downpour came.

It was a wild time for a search-party to be abroad. Those under the shelter of the village roofs thought this; and through the falling shadows straining eyes in fancy could see a wave-racked lake, and on its shifting, sandy bottom two little white faces gazing up with dim, sightless eyes.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAGE.

THE village of Talbotville sat on the crest of a great, sloping hill, small but picturesque, with its old-fashioned houses and wide, old-fashioned street. It consisted of four general stores, two hotels, a few small industries, and a number of people. Surrounding it lay tracts of fertile land, much of it still wild and timbered, a great portion of it under cultivation, and the hand of man still steadily making huge onslaughts upon its timbered parts. Great walnuts and white-oaks, at the present time almost priceless, were then every day being ruthlessly sacrificed that the land might be cleared for cultivation. But, on the whole, the country was still wild. Game there was in its bush-lands; on its wooded ridges deer, wild turkeys and ruffed grouse, or partridge, as they were more familiarly known, were plentiful. In its lower parts, where great elms and tall ash trees stood, an occasional brown or black bear was sometimes to be seen; while there were rumors of timber wolves skulking in the shadows, preying upon the smaller animals, such as foxes, coons and rabbits.

From Talbotville a natural gravel road led down to the shore of Lake Erie. It was severed midway by a deep, clear creek, winding snake-like between high, wooded banks. In its clear depths great supple fish fanned their fins lazily, or darted up against its strong current in search of errant flies. Deeper inland, the timid things of the wood fed close beside it, and

at evening drank from it. It was called Wilson's creek, from the fact that a man named Wilson had at one time owned considerable of the land through which the creek wound.

Four years ago he had built a small mill, some half a mile off the road along its border, intending, doubtless, to place machinery therein to utilize the fine timber growing there. His work, however, was cut short by his death, which happened in a tragical manner.

Being a man of miserly habits, sullen disposition and sharp tongue, it was said he had but few associates and no friends. In building his mill, one of his eccentric notions was to have in its upper part a strong-room made. His reason for so doing no one seemed to understand. At any rate, he had this room built, and across its one small window he had placed iron bars that would withstand all onslaught. These bars he had riveted deep into the hardwood frames of the window. To the simple village folk this seemed a most ridiculous idea, but Wilson, minding this not, went on with his work. The door of the room was of heavy oak, and fastened with a combination lock that the man himself had ingeniously devised.

It was commonly known that Wilson was a very superstitious man and not mentally well balanced. Had any doubts regarding the latter characteristic existed, they would have been dispelled by this strong-room idea of his. As it was, his death was due to his eccentricity, for soon after the mill's completion, and before its machinery had been purchased, he was found by hunters dead on the floor of his strong-room. He had been dead for days. He had closed the

door behind him, apparently forgotten the combination of the lock, and slowly starved to death. Had he not been a man of peculiar habits, given to disappearing and remaining hidden for days at a time, doubtless he would have been missed and saved from his slow, lingering death. What the poor miser suffered, alone in this sepulchred solitude, no one knows. For days he had watched and hoped, no doubt; had prayed that succor might come, and had cursed his Maker in his despair. Deep into the oaken sill he had hacked with his knife, but he had strengthened the window all too thoroughly. On the rough, heavy panels of the door were blood stains, left there from his poor, battling hands. On the floor by his side was scrawled in shaky hand these words:

"I am dying of hunger and thirst. May God pardon my sins. Look in my tin box for my will."

He had written the words with a pencil.

As it was known that Wilson was quite wealthy, and had considerable money banked away somewhere, naturally, after the horror coming from the finding of his dead body had subsided somewhat, all turned their attention to the will and the reading of it, which the coroner announced would be executed in Mr. Thomas Malcolm's store on the evening of the funeral.

Wilson's funeral was a large one. Most funerals were large in those days. Wilson's, however, broke all previous records.

All the villagers attended, and the people from the country came with their families. Two local lodges attended in a body; true, Mr. Wilson had been a member of neither, but why should that hinder proper respect being shown, as well as the gay regalias of

the honorable societies. The brass band, with Mr. Casteel as leader, played a slow waltz tune at the procession's head. It was an impressive sight, this long line of animate beings, conducting with befitting awe all that was mortal of a fellow-man to the City of the Silent. Mr. Shipley was there; he rode in a democrat along with the mourners. This created some wonderment and a little comment, for it had not been known that Mr. Shipley was a relative of the deceased. As he took the lead in the weeping whenever a burst of sorrow was manifest, however, it was generally conceded that he really was a relative. It is true that he suspended weeping long enough to light his pipe when the grave was being filled in, but, as Mr. Sward observed, "it was due t' emotion, an' therefore was no disrespect."

Coming back from the grave, Mr. Casteel, seated by Mr. Ed. Goosecall in his new buggy, played a cornet solo, entitled, "He Sweetly Sleeps." This was one of Professor Casteel's own compositions, and sounded like "He's a Jolly Good Fellow," with variations.

Arrived at Mr. Malcolm's store, chairs were placed for Mr. Shipley and the other two mourners, while the crowd pressed close about, awaiting the reading of the will. Dr. W. B. Ashworth, coroner for Kent County, stood on the counter, a slip of closely written paper in his hand. At length, silence being enjoined, the doctor cleared his throat and read:

"I, Jonas Wilson, being in sound mind, hereby make and write my first, last and only will. I bequeath to William Dustband \$5,000, this being \$1,000 more than I swindled him out of eight years ago. The balance of my property I bequeath to the blind, motherless lass, little Dorothy, with the exception

of my 100 acres, lot 24, Palmyria, which I wish to be equally divided between the only two relatives I possess, Mark Swift, my nephew, and Jane Wilson, my niece."

There were many expressions of surprise and wonder when the doctor concluded the reading. Many hands were extended to Mr. Dustband in congratulation. Miss Wilson and Mr. Swift looked at each other gravely and also shook hands; the other mourner stroked his beard thoughtfully, gently produced his pipe, lit it, and humming "Tra-la-la-lee!" walked gently out. Mr. Shipley's mother had been a second cousin to the deceased. Obviously the latter had overlooked the relationship.

Those inside looked significantly at one another, then a voice asked for little Dorothy.

"Here, dear, they want you to speak to them," said Dustband, picking up the little girl and holding her aloft.

She had a sad, sweet face. Her hair tumbled over her head in waves of gold. Her eyes were big and the color of the skies of June. But they were unseeing, for little Dorothy was blind.

"Dear friends," she said, "I am glad to know that I am no longer poor. He was always kind to me, the man you have covered up to-day, and many times I have talked to him. I used to sing to him. Sometimes I could feel his tears drop upon my hands. Once I asked him why he cried. He said it was because a little sister he once had used to sing to him so before she went away. I am sure she is singing to him now, and I am glad. That is all I can say now."

She bent her face, and hid it in her supporter's long locks. She was crying softly.

CHAPTER III.

SOME OF THE PEOPLE.

Thus it was that little blind Dorothy was provided for. Not that she had ever waited for food or clothes, but with the coming of this unexpected wealth dawned in her heart a new hope, that the money might buy for her that for which she so much longed—her sight.

Ever since the death of his own little girl, upon whom he had lavished great love, William Dustband, the big, kind-hearted grocer, had kept the blind girl always near him. In his home she enjoyed all the privileges of a loved daughter. Often, at the close of day, they could be seen, these two, walking hand in hand and talking earnestly. This was before the good fairy brought them wealth, when the gratification of little Dorothy's heart's desire seemed a long way off, and business worries were busy painting white streaks in her protector's long black curls. Now, with her hope shining bright, she was very happy, the girl; and the man could defeat failure with its deadly enemy, money.

William Dustband was a widower, his wife having died some eight years before, leaving behind her one child, a little girl, who soon followed her mother across the valley. After the death of the wife he adored, Dustband had drunk more or less heavily. As a consequence, his business had suffered, and his

fine physique had become somewhat undermined. But after his wee girlie was called, his heart was nigh to breaking, so that he drank even heavier and neglected his business the more. It was at this juncture that Wilson had seen a chance to swindle him, and, with ti flowing bowl for bait, had laid his plan so cunningly that Dustband was within an hour made the poorer and Wilson the richer by some thousands of dollars. Had his business been then on a basis to have withstood the loss, it would have been hard enough to bear. But at this time the parting of so large an amount of money meant bankruptcy to him. So he drank more heavily, and became less and less a man, *until she came*.

Until she came, little blind Dorothy, and with her childish prayers wooed him back to his manhood again. It was strange the influence she exerted for his good. He straightened away, touched liquor but seldom, and attended strictly to business. He would not let the child depart from his home.

"Let her stay with me. I need her so much," he pleaded, when others, in kindness, offered her the shelter of their homes. "Let her stay with me if she is willing." And Dorothy would twine her wee arms about his neck, and kiss his lips, so hungry for baby love, the only flower that was left untrampled when Eden was destroyed.

So she was left with him, and they were happy in each other's company, the blind child leading the man, the man leaning on the child and confiding to her his difficulties and fears.

The crash was inevitable that would have made Dustband a poor man. Then kind Providence so willed

that what was justly his should be returned to him again.

A part of the property willed to little Dorothy was a farm of eighty acres rented and tilled by one Mr. Ed. Goosecall. Mr. Goosecall was a big man, a homely man, and a pretty bad man. His badness, however, was pretty much on the surface, profanity being his specialty, so that it did no great harm; for, as Dustband said of him, "There is really not much havoc committed by a man who tries to show you he is a bad one, because you can hear him cutting the wind, usually, before he comes in sight. It's the one who doesn't show his hand, and comes up against the wind, that needs watching."

Mr. Goosecall was not one of the latter class. He usually said the things he thought, and said them when he thought them. He was a big, generous hearted man, kind to his wife and family. He liked his drop of bitters, but his larder was always furnished before the old-fashioned jug was refilled. In appearance, save in point of size, Goosecall was the direct opposite of Dustband. The latter stood six feet two, as straight as an arrow; was all bone and sinew. His arms were disproportionately long, reaching, when hanging at his sides, to below his knees. His face was dark, sallow and intellectual. His manner bespoke education and refinement; he spoke and dressed like a gentleman. His hair was jet black save about his temples, where care had laid her frosty fingers, and hung in heavy curls about his shoulders. His hands were white and delicately shaped as a woman's; he wore his nails long. He had hobbies—this was one of them.

Goosecall, on the other hand, was great of stature and bulky of flesh. His hair and bristling beard were a fiery red. His texture was coarse throughout. His eyes were light blue and inclined to be weak. Dust-band's eyes were limpid, brown and large.

In a rude cottage, midway between the village and Farmer Goosecall's, dwelt one Charles Fields, fish-peddler and horse dealer. He was a tall, black-whiskered man, much addicted to talking about his own affairs and the affairs of others. He also had the reputation of being the biggest liar in the country, a distinction he never attempted to deny. There were but three in the Fields family; himself, his wife, a small, nervous woman whose mouth had a habit of sliding from one side of her face to the other whenever she got excited, and Buz.

Buz was a boy—a real, genuine mixture of those ingredients that go to make up the true article. He had a good face, a tender heart, and was well-mannered. He found it hard to obey orders, and slipped into trouble as though he had been built for it. Buz was twelve years old. He tended to the horses when his father was away, which was often, a fish-peddler being something of a traveller in a way. He also did odd chores about the house. His mother was proud of Buz; he always stood head of his class in school, and whenever anything special was being given in the church, he sang the leading parts in the choir. He did not chew or smoke, as so many of the other boys did. She was proud of this, and proud of his attainments. But Buz had attainments of which even his doting mother was unaware, and one of these was the ability to conceal from her watchful eyes the fact

that he did chew just a little. His father knew it—had known it for some time, in fact—but he and Buz were chums and never told things on one another.

Buz had another chum, a boy of his own age, a small, wiry, freckled boy who belonged to no one in particular and was owned by everybody generally. His name was Gaff Linkum. This was his middle and first name; he did not have a last one. A band of gipsies, it was thought, had left Gaff Linkum on a doorstep in the village when he was but a tiny red bunch. An old lady, Mrs. Dashmore by name, had taken the poor little fellow in and had given him protection and shelter until her death, which happened when he was six years old. The old lady had named him Gaff Linkum; why she saw fit to inflict such a name on the poor, helpless morsel only God and the sainted lady know. Perhaps these were the first words his baby tongue had mastered; anyway, he got the name and it stuck to him. When his foster mother died, her son Dick, a young man of twenty-three, took Gaff under his protection. Dick Dashmore was kind to Gaff, treating him like a brother and working hard at odd jobs in order that he might purchase for the boy the clothing and food he required.

Dick was of medium height. His hair was black and closely cropped; his eyes were black and beady. He had a way of carrying his head on one side and staring straight before him. He was quick with his tongue and quick with his hands, as more than one Talbotville swain could vouch for. He got mixed up in many encounters, but to his credit be it known that it was usually through his taking the part of another and a weaker party. Dick had no schooling; had

never had a chance to get any, for which some people pitied him, while all respected him for his simple honesty. He was very much attached to Gaff Linkum, and managed to secure for him such playthings as delight the heart of a boy. When Gaff was nine years old, he was given a single-barrelled shot-gun for a present. In those old, muzzle-loading days this was indeed a prize that many a boy might love to possess. He bought him fish-hooks and twine, and showed him how to properly bait a hook. He took the boy on long walks through the woods, and showed him where in the swift streams the black bass would most likely be lurking. He taught him all the woodcraft he himself knew, and Gaff treasured this knowledge and added to it day by day.

This, then, was the boy whom Buz Fields had for an almost constant companion.

In school they shared the same seat, and upheld each other in life's first battles. Out of school they shared all the pure joys life had to offer, and these were many.

They never quarrelled, because there was never occasion for it. Buz Fields was a born leader. Gaff Linkum was a born soldier, and knew how to obey orders. As a consequence, there was ever harmony between these two.

Down on the shores of Lake Erie, half buried in the sands, the rotting hulk of a boat lay beached. As long as the boys could remember she had been a landmark there. On her prow, in letters now almost obliterated, could still be traced her name, *The Blinker*. Underneath the name someone had inscribed in crude letters these words, "Cast ashore

on the night of July 16, 18—. Sacred to the memory of the poor souls who perished with her." For some unknown reason this old yawl held a strange fascination for the boys. Often had they sat on her prow when a big summer moon was on the lake and talked to her in low tones as though she understood them.

Seated on the sands, one boy would whisper:

"Poor old boat! You did your best to get 'em ashore, didn't you?"

Then both lads would bend close to her prow awaiting an answer. Sometimes a little breeze from off the lake would sweep across her and sigh an answer both seemed to understand. Sometimes it came from the waves which beat the shore. But neither wind nor wave ever breathed to them the secret which one day they were to know.

To the lads the old boat seemed a part of themselves, they had known her so long. To them she seemed to be waiting there to be reclaimed, and out of sympathy they came to her often and talked to her when the night had come and the wide white path of moonlight trailed across the lake.

CHAPTER IV.

SAD TIDINGS.

NOTHING had been seen of either of the boys for two days and two nights. This was indeed strange, for Buz Fields after a romp with his chum Gaff Linkum was always careful to return home as early in the evening as possible. It is small wonder, therefore, that after the first day and night had passed, his parents grew anxious. Mrs. Fields brought her trouble to the village and told her fears to sympathetic listeners. The poor little woman was almost frantic. Buz's father let a load of fish spoil in order that he might "look 'round fer the boy some," as he said, and before he would consent to a general search being made. He wore a worried expression at this time, and talked horse deal not any, all of which showed that he was deeply concerned.

On the evening of the second day the big man broke down entirely and cried like a child. He refused to be comforted, refused to go home, so the village women consoled his wife with words of hope during the second night.

The following day a movement was set on foot by Mr. William Dustband to get up a party to search for the boys, which, as we know, was quickly done. It was, as we have learned, the sad tidings of the finding of the drifting skiff, with Buz's hat floating alongside, carried to the Fields' home by Mr. Shipley,

that blasted all hope and turned that home into a house of mourning. No one could have executed the task of breaking the sad news with more becoming decorum than Mr. Shipley. He told the story simply and with befitting sadness. He wept with the others and held Mrs. Fields' hand in silent sympathy. Before leaving he addressed the sorrowing mother thus: "The Lord gives things to us, the Lord takes things away from us. Praise the Lord."

* * * * *

Night had fallen early, for the storm was still raging in fury. In the rude waiting-room of Mr. Simon Diggs' hotel, Dick Dashmore, wild-eyed and white of face, paced restlessly up and down the floor. "It can't be so, I tell you," he kept repeating to those silent men assembled there. "Little Gaff drowned—oh, no, it can't be so!"

They did not attempt to pacify him. Men are poor things at such work. Besides, all felt sure that the tidings were true.

A fat commercial traveller blew his nose hard and offered Dashmore a cigar. He took it mechanically, gazing straight before him the while. "Tell me," he said, "do you believe it?" and the traveller found it hard to keep his voice steady as he answered. "Not a word of it!" and, if his chance of life had depended on his speaking the truth at this time, he would have lied just the same.

Meanwhile, through the heavy downpour, William Dustband and his followers pressed onward. Darkness had settled over the land before they reached the north woods. They had heard nothing as yet of the

drifting skiff; they only knew the boys were lost. At the bridge across Wilson's Creek the searchers stopped. Lanterns were produced and lit. The party divided, one to take the south side, the other the north side of the creek.

"Gentlemen," said Goosecall, "before we enter the bush, suppose I hello once?" He creased his felt hat, and let the water pour from it as he spoke. All being agreed that this would be an excellent idea, Mr. Goosecall drew in his breath and sent forth a call that might have been mistaken for the whistle of a fire-boat. All bent their ears, and listened intently.

"I heard an answer," cried a voice.

"So did I," said another.

"Listen, then," commanded Goosecall.

Again he sent a resounding "Hello!" across the night.

Sure enough, they heard an answer. Faint and far away it sounded. All were silent for a time; then Mr. Dustband spoke.

"It came from the haunted mill!" he cried.

Following his words came a blinding flash of lightning, and above the crash which followed, Charlie Fields' voice rang out.

"Fer God's sake, come on, everybody! They're trapped in th' strong room!"

* * * * *

Business was brisk in the Commercial Hotel. Landlord Diggs was kept busy twitching up and down the bar, waiting on customers. Occasionally he would give vent to a loud "Eh?" whenever he thought it time for something new to have developed. As this

usually happened when silence had fallen upon the group, however, nobody paid any particular attention to him. Landlord Diggs was not deaf from choice. He found it hard to have to ask favors.

"Anythin' new?" he asked of a quiet man with smallpox pitted face, who had just entered.

The newcomer shook his head.

"Buz Fields and Gaff Linkum have been drowneded, I suppose you've heered?" shouted the landlord.

"So I've heern," answered the other.

"I say they've been drowneded," repeated Diggs.

"I say that I've heern they was," returned the other, raising his voice and nodding his head. "I've heern it."

Diggs surveyed him a moment as though deliberating, then turned away to serve a customer. This done, he returned, and addressed the man with the pitted face again.

"Why *don't* you believe it?" he asked, defiantly.

The man looked dazed for a moment; then, turning to a bystander, he asked, "Kin you make him hear? If you kin, fer gracious sake tell him I *have* heern it."

The man addressed walked to the bar and motioned Diggs to bend his head.

"McDonald has heard it!" he shouted.

"Then why didn't he say so?" replied Diggs, with a snort.

CHAPTER V.

THE BOYS.

Now, where were the boys? What had kept them so long from home? Had they really lost their lives through the capsizing of the boat? If not, where were they?

We will go back a day or two and lead up to their whereabouts.

Three days ago Buz and Gaff had met by appointment at the school gate. The school was now closed, it being vacation time; else they might have met at some more agreeable place of rendezvous. It was a beautiful August morning, the soft, balmy air suggesting a bath in the cool waters of Erie and a stroll along her gravelled beach.

Gaff was at the place of meeting first, and sat idly tying a string about his big toe as Buz came up.

His first words were: "She's got seven!"

"No!" said Buz, in breathless incredulity.

"Yep; four of 'em her color and 'tother three spotted."

"Oh, Gaff, ain't that jolly! Where's she got 'em?"

"Woodshed," answered Gaff, springing to his feet.

"Say, Buz, we'll keep 'em all t' hunt with, eh?"

"Bet they'll make good coon dogs," said Buz, nodding.

"Coon dogs nuthin'! She's a setter, ain't she?"

"Well?"

"Well, whoever heered of a setter bein' a coon dog?"

"I have," rejoined Buz, stoutly.

"Well, maybe you have," said Gaff. "I don't say they won't hunt coon. What I say is, they shouldn't be allowed t'."

"When kin I see 'em, Gaff?"

"Soon as we have a swim. Gee, I'm dyin' fer a swim! Let's hustle."

Arrived at the beach, the boys tiptoed across the prickly gravel and gingerly felt of the water with their bare toes.

"Warm as milk!" cried Buz, shedding his clothes.

"Warm! I should say so," agreed Gaff. "Say, Buz?"

Buz looked back over his bare shoulder.

"Whatist?" he asked, in one word.

"Here's a boat with oars in it!" cried Gaff.

"Gee! Ain't that jolly?" yelled Buz. "We'll have a row in it as soon as we—"

Plunk! He had dived, and his waving, disappearing heels threw a gesture of joy to Gaff.

He came up blowing and looking for his chum. He was not visible.

"Gaff!" he shouted, "Gaffey!"

No response.

"Now, where under the sun has he gone?" said Buz to himself.

Suddenly he felt something close tight on the calf of his leg. He thought of sea serpents, devil fish, turtles—all the monsters of the deep, in fact—and gave an ear-splitting yell.

Then Gaff's red head hopped up, and on his freckled face was a grin of real enjoyment.

"Scared me most t' death!" shivered Buz. "Bet I kin tre ' furthest!"

"Bet you can't!" cried Gaff.

"Say, I'd rather go fer a row," said Buz. "Suppose we go now."

They dashed in, dressed quickly, and minced across the hot sand to the boat.

"Say, Buz, there's a big, yaller-winged moth in the bow," whispered Gaff. "Bring your hat and let's catch him."

Buz got his hat and crept up to the boat.

"There," cried Gaff, "you've scared him!"

Buz laid his hat on the boat's gunwale and got behind her.

"Come on, Gaff. Give her a shove with me," he said.

"All right," responded Gaff. "Now, all together. He-o-he!"

Their combined efforts were quite enough to send the little skiff into the water; more than enough, in fact, for she darted out beyond their reach, merrily, like a live thing.

"We'll have to undress and swim out after her," cried Buz. "The wind's takin' her right out, an' my hat's on her."

They undressed as quickly as they could, but by the time they were ready the boat was far out, the wind carrying her speedily away.

The boys looked at each other in despair.

"Who does she belong to, Gaff?" asked Buz.

"Don't know. Never seen her afore," Gaff answered. "I hope someone picks her up."

"The fish-tug might," said Buz, thoughtfully. "She's driftin' right in her track."

"Can't we get another boat somewheres, Buz?"

"Naw! Where kin we get a boat? Coal-tar

Shipley won't let us have his, an' Ben Sward's boat is too heavy fer us t' handle."

"Well," said Gaff, "don't know as talkin' 'll help us any. Let's ferget that we ever saw th' old boat. Tell you what we'll do, Buz. We'll go fishin'."

"Where'll we go?"

"See here, Buz, I know a place where th' black bass have been livin' so long they think they own th' crick, and they'll take any bait from a minnie to a bull-frog."

Buz's eyes sparkled.

"Whatcher talkin' 'bout? I don't believe it."

Gaff picked up a piece of slate-stone about the size of a silver dollar, and, holding it in the hollow of his hands, he breathed these solemn words upon it:

"Slate-stone, slate-stone, withro!
Spickity, spunkity, spe-spi-spo;
If-I-lie, may-I-die,
An' be covered up like you."

He sent the slate-stone skimming and dancing far out upon the lake. Buz was satisfied now that his chum spoke the truth.

"Gaff," he said, as they waiked back along the gravelled road, with the morning sun breaking through the tree-tops and lighting up their glad faces, "Gaff, is there anythin' you'd ruther be'n a boy?"

Gaff scratched his red head reflectively, as most boys do when they think deeply.

"Dogs have a purty easy time, I guess," he answered, thoughtfully.

"I'd ruther be a boy'n a dog," said Buz.

"Old Jim Tompkins says that when folks die they turn into dogs an' things," said Gaff. "He says Mr.

Creation 'll be a mouse some day, he's so small, and that your dad 'll be a parrot because he tells everythin' he hears."

"I reckon, then, that Jack Shipley 'll be a skunk, Gaff. He smells pretty strong, don't he?"

"I never smelled anythin' stronger," attested Gaff. The boys walked on in silence for a time.

"You ain't afeared much o' ghosts, are you, Buz?" Gaff asked, at length.

"Not very," answered Buz. "Why?"

"Well, we're goin' t' fish near the haunted mill. That's all."

"Cracky, I don't mind that. Ghosts ain't around durin' th' day, anyway."

"I guess they're around, but they don't molest people any durin' th' day, Buz. I've seen old Wilson's ghost twice now, and it was in th' daytime, too."

"Say, ain't that jolly, though?" cried Buz. "Come on! Let's get a move on."

Ere long the Wilson bridge was reached, and Gaff, plunging into some neighboring alders, brought forth two long, slender birch poles. From another hiding place he produced a miniature draw-seine of mosquito netting.

Giving one end of the seine to Buz, Gaff led the way to a shallow spot in the creek, and, putting his brail close to the bottom, made a small circuit through the water, wading very carefully. The haul was a good one, and a number of fine minnows, mostly chub and shiners, were secured. Then Gaff produced a pail, and the two boys, hearts beating high with hope, crossed the ditch and were swallowed up in the wood.

They were to have a thrilling experience before they returned.

CHAPTER VI

THE HAUNTED MILL

WHERE a great elm had long stood sentinel above the clear waters of the creek, where shadows rested upon those waters gently, like the cloak of peace, lay the deep pool in which the greedy bass had made their home. Gaff Linkum had learned of this, and to this spot the boys carefully wended their way.

Stealthily they crept up to the creek's mossy bank, quietly they deposited their pail of minnows beside them, and without so much as a whispered word, produced from their trousers' pockets twine and hooks, and attached them to the long birch poles. Then from the pail darting, wary minnows were secured, and strung without compunction upon the sharp hooks.

Gaff made the first catch. This was due to the fact that Buz had overlooked the importance of spitting upon his bait, as both boys afterward agreed.

There, in the restful shadow, with here and there a dash of sunshine leaving its gold upon the leaves, the blossoms and the water, the two boys drank their fill of the sweetest of all the untarnished pleasures of childhood. The wind stirred the trees to soft song, sweet and restful as is ever the music from the harp of Nature. And then the fish were biting, oh, so well! Eight beautiful black bass were theirs already.

At length Buz leaned back upon the soft moss with a contented sigh.

"I'm awfully sleepy," he whispered.

"Guess we've got enough fish, haven't we, Buz?" asked Gaff, laying his pole down and standing up to stretch his legs.

"Yep," answered Buz, who heard Gaff's voice as though coming from a long distance.

"Let's get back, then. I'm hungry."

But Buz heard him not. He was sleeping peacefully. Gaff took the fishpole from his chum's hand and slowly wound up the twine, watching his friend's face the while.

"Why wasn't I born good-lookin', like Buz?" he thought. "Wish I wasn't so freckled. Wish I didn't have red hair."

He sat down and, with his face in his hands, gave himself up to reflection.

A muskrat swam across the creek and climbed the bank almost at his feet. A cock-grouse drummed him defiance, and flew up into a tree-top close beside him. But he was oblivious to it all. He was thinking of something else. He was repeating over and over to himself this question:

"Who am I?"

By-and-bye Buz sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Sleep, I guess," he said, yawning. "Say, Gaff!"

No response.

"I say, Gaffy!"

Gaff looked around and sighed.

"Woke up, have you?" he said, a grin lighting his face. "Say, suppose we have a look at th' haunted mill."

"Better not," advised Buz.

"Why?"

"Well, a feller should be careful about—"

Buz hesitated, and Gaff laughed.

"Scared o' the ghost," he cried. "Well, come on. Th' ghost won't hurt us any, I guess."

Buz watched while Gaff strung the fish on a crotched willow twig.

"I ain't scared, Gaff," he said, slowly. "You know I ain't scared, but I be a little superstitious, same as yourself."

"Oh, there's a ghost there all right enough," responded Gaff. "I believe in ghosts, only I don't think a ghost would be mean enough t' harm kids like us, Buz."

"Well, we'll risk it, then."

Arrived at the mill, the boys hung their fish on a nail in the door-jamb and proceeded to investigate.

"I'll dare you to go in!" challenged Buz.

"Come on, then," the other answered. "Cracky, but it's stuffy in here, ain't it?"

They walked about downstairs for a time. Both boys were thinking of and longing to do the same thing, have a look at the strong room.

At length, as from a common impulse, both turned to the stairway. Cobwebs hung like festoons upon and across it. It was dark and gloomy, but the boys had started. They would not turn back.

The upper part of the mill was closer, darker even than the lower. As they reached the top of the stair, two or three bats, startled from their hiding places, swept the faces of the unwelcome visitors with clammy, leathery wings. The door of the strong room

stood partly ajar. Through the barred, unglazed window a ray of sunlight was attempting to penetrate. There was, however, light enough for the boys to observe the heavy, pleated door of oak, and the general solidity of the structure. By a strange coincidence, the struggling ray of light fell directly across the pencilled message that the miser Wilson had left on the white boards of the floor. The boys bent above it and spelled out the words; when they stood up again the faces of both were white.

"Let's go, Gaff," said Buz. "I've had enough o' this. Haven't you?"

"You bet!" answered Gaff. "Plenty! Say, listen t' thet door slam downstairs. Wind must be risin'."

"Yep. It's blowin' some. It's sure makin' thet ole door hum. Why it's blowin' up th' stairway 'bout sixty miles 'n hour."

As he spoke a fiercer gust than its fellows tore up the stairway, and with cyclone fury forced the heavy door of the strong-room shut with a bang. Then the boys looked into one another's eyes.

They were prisoners in the strong room of the haunted mill; for only from the outside could the door be opened without understanding the combination of the lock.

CHAPTER VII.

LONG HOURS OF HORROR.

It was the evening of the second day of their confinement that Gaff sat up weakly and stared with wild, bloodshot eyes at a form lying motionless on the floor beside him.

"Buz," he whispered, hoarsely. "Buz, speak t' me. You ain't dead, be you, Buz?"

"No, I ain't dead, Gaffy, only I'm so thirsty—I'm so thirsty!"

"Yes, yes, I know. My mouth is so dry I can't talk 'bove a whisper. I guess they won't never find us, Buz. There's no use o' shoutin' any more."

Gaff got to his feet and staggered over to the window.

"I've been watchin' thet clear water rushin' by all day long," he said, a sob choking his voice. "I've seen th' birds splashin' an' drinkin' there. Oh, Buz, if we could only get down t' th' crick!"

"I was dreamin' o' th' crick when you woke me, Gaff. I thought me an' you was lyin' beside it, drinkin', drinkin', drinkin'."

"You ain't hungry no more, then, Buz?"

"No, not hungry, Gaffy. Only so thirsty!"

The shadows swooped and closed the little room in darkness. The boys could no longer see each other's faces, but side by side they lay now, their arms about each other's necks.

"Buz," said Gaff, hours later, when a big, startled moon looked through the barred window upon them, and the boys lay gazing out upon her, "Buz, if I had jest one cup o' clear, col' water, do you know, I wouldn't drink it?"

"What would you do 'ith it, Gaff?"

"You know, Buz."

"Yes, I guess I know, Gaffy. You 'ud want me t' drink it—but I wouldn't."

Their arms went tighter about each other's necks, and the moon crept away as though ashamed of her helplessness.

The evening of the third day came early. A heavy storm was brewing, and the sun was forced from sight behind great, ominous clouds.

All afternoon the boys had lain too weak and suffering to speak to one another. They had been now nearly three days without food or water. Despair had settled upon them. On the first night of their confinement their chief horror had been the thought of spending the night in a room said to be haunted. Every gust of wind that whistled about the building, the scraping of each twig upon its roof, filled them with a nameless terror. On the second night this horror was swallowed up in a greater one, for death for them seemed inevitable. And now it was the third night. The horror could not last much longer, they knew.

In the evening Buz became delirious, and talked incessantly of streams and lakes. He thought he was with little blind Dorothy.

Gaff dozed fitfully beneath the window, through which the moist air blew in soothingly and touched

the prisoner's hot face. He awoke with a feeling that someone was giving him a drink from a huge pitcher. The rain was beating in upon his face. Outside it was falling in torrents.

Weakly he staggered to his feet, and, snatching his old felt hat from the floor, he held it out through the window. Good luck was with him. He could reach out as far as the eaves, from which the water was spouting gloriously. In a minute's time he had water. He almost fainted for joy. He thought he must still be dreaming. Carrying his precious burden very carefully, he staggered to his chum's side.

"Buz!" he called, thickly. "Buz! look up! I've got water."

Buz sat up.

"Where is it, Gaffy?" he whispered. "I can't stand, Gaffy."

"Here, then—raise your head so, Buz—now, put your face right in, but don't drink too much at first."

Buz raised himself on his elbow.

"Have you had enough, Gaff?" he asked.

But the smell of the water had taken possession of him, and he was drinking even before Gaff remembered that he himself had not yet tasted it.

He let Buz take three or four huge gulps, then gently drew the hat away.

"That's all you kin have jest now. You'll kill yourself, you know. Now, you hold th' hat while I get mine, an' don't you let me have any more'n four swallers."

"Gaff," said Buz, when, half an hour later, they stood by the window, their arms held out through its

opening in the heavy rain, "Gaff, you gave me the first drink, didn't you?"

"You was worse off 'an I was, Buz," answered Gaff, foolishly.

"Thet water made me feel strong ag'in. I believe I could—"

But Gaff had gripped him by the arm as though enjoining silence.

"I heered someone shout, Buz," he cried, joyfully.

"Then answer 'em, Gaffy—answer 'em quick. If you kin holler, do it. I can't."

Gaff put his face close against the bars, and did his best. It wasn't a very loud shout, but the wind was favorable for listening ears to hear; so that the two boys, with shaking limbs and heart a-tremble, were greeted with another call, which to them meant rescue from death.

* * * * *

"Yes, they're in here, all right," said Goosecall, as he rubbed his barked nose on a red handkerchief. He had scrubbed it against a small tree in his hurry to liberate the boys. "Let's see. Where is th' door? Hold your lanthorn up, you fellers," he shouted. "How's a man goin' t' see in this rain?"

He put in a number of fierce adjectives, qualifying the weather, the tree that had nearly broken his nose, and the men who carried the lanthorns.

William Dustband, wet but cheerful now that the boys had been located, leaned his long form up against the building and held his lanthorn aloft.

"There's the door standing wide open to receive you," he said. Then, turning abruptly to the others, he queried, "Where's Shipley?"

"He ain't here," answered Fields. "He's in town."

"Are you sure?" asked Dustband. "It seems to me I can smell fish somewhere, and—"

"Well, by thunder! Look here! This is what you smell, I guess," cried Goosecall, laughing.

He pointed to a dark object suspended just above Dustband's head. There hung the string of fish the boys had caught.

Half an hour later the news that Gaff and Buz had been found went flashing through the village.

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CHAPTER VIII.

MOLLIE GRAY.

MISS DUSTBAND was watering her geraniums. Little Dorothy sat on the rustic seat beneath the maples and stroked the head of a great Newfoundland, lying in her lap. Miss Dustband was a sweet-faced, trim little woman, with just a streak of white in her hair. Ever since the death of her sister-in-law she had stayed with her brother and looked after the housekeeping. That she was an apt housekeeper could be noted by a peep into the white cottage nestling beneath the trees. Everything within that cottage was arranged with taste and care. The little woman's big brother loved her, little Dorothy worshipped her, shaggy Bruno was never far away from her, and the sleek tabby cat climbed in her lap whenever a chance to do so presented itself.

Miss Dustband had just finished her task, and was cutting one of the scarlet blossoms for Dorothy when Bruno raised his head and gave a long, deep howl of pleasure.

"It's someone he knows, aunty," cried Dorothy. "He is fairly knocking me off my seat with his big, bushy tail."

Even as she spoke two warm arms encircled her, and she was gathered to a heart that throbbed wildly against her own.

"You dear little sweetheart, you!" cried a musical

voice. "Let me kiss you again, dear heart. How you have grown!"

"Mollie!" cried Dorothy, throwing her arms about the girl's neck. "Dear, dear Mollie!"

"Oh, my child, how glad, how very glad I am to see you!" cried Miss Dustband, coming forward and taking the laughing, crying new arrival to her breast.

"Oh, I am so delighted to see you *all* again, aunty dear. I was afraid I would not get over this summer, but here I am!" cried the girl.

"And here you will stay, if our love can hold you," said her aunt.

"Bruno, you great, beautiful thing! You're glad to see me, too, aren't you?"

The dog whined, and put his great paws on the girl's shoulders. She staggered away from him, laughing.

"It is so nice to be remembered," she said.

"Bruno," spoke Miss Dustband, "go and bring Bill home."

The big dog turned and loped down the path.

"Will he really bring uncle home, aunty?" asked Mollie, watching the dog take the gate at a bound.

"Wait and see, dear."

In a few minutes Bruno was back, looking pleased, as though he had fulfilled his mission creditably. Shortly afterward Mr. Dustband was seen coming down the road.

"Here, Mollie, get behind this rose bush!" whispered her aunt. "We will surprise Uncle Bill."

"Yes, dear, do," said Dorothy.

"He wouldn't take no for an answer," cried Dustband, hurrying up. "I was pretty busy, too, I tell

you. Tried to put him off by saying I would come soon, but he wouldn't hear of it. He nearly tore my arm off trying to pull me out." The man laughed heartily. "Now, what I want to know is, what's up?"

"We've got a surprise for you, uncle," said Dorothy.

"You don't say, Chick! What is it?"

"It's something you really think a great deal of," said Miss Dustband, smiling.

"Bet it's a custard," guessed the man.

"No, it's nothing to eat. Guess again!" cried Dorothy.

"It's a person," said Miss Dustband. "You can't guess who?"

"Yes, I can. I smell lavender, and that means that my little New Yorker is somewhere near. I'll bet it's Mollie Gray."

"Oh, I just know somebody told you," cried Mollie, running forward and throwing herself into his arms.

He kissed her tenderly; then held her off at arm's length to note what changes a year had made.

"The bud of yesterday is a rose to-day," he said, letting his hand rest on her black, wavy hair.

There was much about this girl that reminded him of another he had met in years that rested beneath the shade of time. The slight, animated form, the hazel eyes that looked and held, the clear-cut features of the dark face, the poise of the little head, the carriage—all of the girl from the city reminded him of *her*.

"Mollie Bawn," he said, tenderly, calling her by an old pet name. "The more beautiful you become, the more you grow like her. May your character be as beautiful in the full blossom as the half unfolded bud promises, as beautiful as was hers, my sweet."

"I could not wish more than to be like her in looks and character," said the girl, softly.

Placing his other arm about his sister's shoulder, the man led them over to where a little blind girl sat, her face buried in the long mane of a watchful dog. Bending, he raised the little face in his hands and kissed it tenderly.

"If she be looking on," he said, huskily, "she will be happy in my happiness, for to-day I have her image in my Mollie Bawn, her support and comfort in a dear sister, her tenderness and sweetness in my guardian angel, little Dorothy."

Then a tiny hedge sparrow in the cedar close beside them lifted his little head and poured forth an old fashioned song.

CHAPTER IX.

NAN.

"As I told our parson this morning, I think there is more harm than good comes from singing schools. What's the sense of a lot of foolish young people getting together and shouting their lungs out? The only one who profits by their foolishness is that little side-whiskered Casteel. He knows what he's about, all right."

Mrs. Malcolm slashed her knife viciously into the potato she was peeling, and compressed her lips.

"Now, I'm just about out of patience with our Nan. Everything that comes up she takes a hand in. She says she is going to attend this singing school affair, and I know nothing will stop her if she says so."

"She is so full of spirits, Mrs. Malcolm."

"Yes, I know, Miss Simson, but that's no excuse for her racing off to everything that comes along. Can you guess where she is now?"

The other smiled and shook her head.

"Well, then, she's down at Dashmore's place cooking up some things for him and Gaff. Dick's sick."

"Ah, that is a beautiful trait in your daughter, Mrs. Malcolm," said her visitor, earnestly. "No wonder the villagers love her, she is so unselfish."

"She is that, I'll admit," agreed Mrs. Malcolm, a tender light coming into her eyes. "But for all that, she's the most headstrong girl I ever seen, and she does the most outlandish things you ever heard of."

Last night she came lugging in a dirty, bony spaniel pup, that she had picked up out of some gutter, holding him right up against her clean waist, and letting him lick her face all over. Ugh!"

Mrs. Malcolm shuddered and twisted her comely face into a grimace.

"Think of it! Letting a dirty, starved thing like that lick one's face!"

Miss Simson laughed at the horror depicted on the good woman's countenance.

"She is a lover of animals, then?" she asked.

"She's a lover of anything that's too poor, too homely or too sick for other people to notice. I sometimes wish she had more pride, Miss Simson."

The other was silent. Perhaps she thought there were characteristics to be more admired than pride, of which actions prompted by the sympathy of a great heart that was noble enough to feel, fearless enough to act, were not the least.

"How does your brother like teaching our school?"

Mrs. Malcolm's question broke the train of Miss Simson's thoughts, and dispelled the vision of a girl's sweet Irish face that had been before her eyes.

"He likes his school very much indeed, thank you. He takes a great interest in his work. It is a pleasure for Rob to teach, he takes so with the children."

"That he does," agreed Mrs. Malcolm.

"He and the boys, Buz and Gaff, are the best of chums. I am becoming a little jealous of those boys. Rob says they are rattlers. What is a rattler, Mrs. Malcolm?"

"Did he say those boys were that?" asked Mrs. Malcolm, as she drained the water off the snowy

potatoes. "If he did, I guess maybe rattler is Latin for little devil."

Miss Simson's laugh was so unfeigned, so contagious, that her hostess laughed, too. Mrs. Malcolm, being Irish, sometimes said witty things that surprised herself even as much as they did her listeners.

And while they laughed, a tall young girl in white stood in the open doorway behind them, a mischievous smile on her fresh young face. Her eyes were as Irish blue as a glimpse of the sky between dark clouds, her face was the hue of a white rose petal upon which some amorous red lily had left his kiss and the crimson memory of his love. Her hair, the color of red gold, was carelessly knotted upon her shapely little head, save a few defiant ringlets that would not be confined and snuggled caressingly against her neck and temples.

"Mammie!" she cried.

She had crept up and thrown her arms about the elder woman's neck, and held her tight so that she could not move.

"Mammie, I heard you swear. You said 'devil.'"

"Nan, behave yourself!" commanded her mother, trying hard to be stern and struggling to free herself from those strong young arms. "What will Miss Simson here think of you? Let me go, I say."

"Not until I hear you say that you are sorry you said—that naughty word."

"I didn't swear when I said it. Nan, please let me go."

"What will you give me?"

"You will find that out soon enough, if you don't let me go at once."

"Give me a kiss then, mammie mine."

"I won't, so there, now!"

"Well, I'll just be after taking it anyway, you dear-old-scold-you. There, I got four!" cried the girl, as she released her hold and flew laughing for shelter behind Miss Simson's chair.

"Nan," said her mother, disapprovingly, "look at your hair. You should be ashamed to come in where there are visitors with it that way."

"'Twon't stay any other way," said Nan, unconcernedly. "Are you coming to our singing school, Miss Simson?"

"I—I don't know," answered Miss Simson, looking at Mrs. Malcolm and hesitating. "Some people do not seem to think it—ahem!—just the proper thing, my dear."

"Rob says he is going," said Nan.

"Nan!" cried her mother, "have you no manners at all, calling the teacher by his first name like that? What opinion will Miss Simson have of you?"

"Well, mammie, what's the use of having a first name if one's never to be called by it? Besides," she added, "he calls me Nan. "Why shouldn't I call him Rob?"

"I am sure it is much nicer this way," said Miss Simson. "I know my brother likes to be called by his first name, and if you will call me by mine I will be so glad."

"It is Nellie, isn't it?" asked Nan, shyly.

Half an hour later the two girls walked down the wide path to the gate, their arms about one another's waists.

In the doorway stood a portly lady with a smile of peaceful maternal gladness on her face.

CHAPTER X.

SINGIN' SCHOOL.

It was the first night of Singin' School. The school-house was pretty well filled with people, mostly young, but a sprinkling of older ones were there also.

On a platform a table had been placed, and thereon sat a good-sized coal-oil lamp, which threw a spasmodic light across and adown the room.

On its right sat a consumptive melodeon, borrowed for the occasion, and behind melodeon and light stood Professor Casteel. He bowed gravely to the assemblage, to the lamp, the table and the instrument.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I am most pleased to note that the large attendance here to-night denotes that a great interest is being manifested toward the cultivation of the vocal organ. I refer to the voice."

He bowed again and inserted two fingers of his left hand between the buttonholes of his closely buttoned vest, as he had seen Napoleon Bonaparte do, in a picture. The words and the gesture caught his hearers. They applauded.

"We have in our fair village, I believe, a great deal of uncultivated talent. The Tonic Sol-Fa method, of which I am the humble teacher, will, I feel, be the agent to develop such talent, and my ambition is to send forth from our fair village such songsters as the world will bow in homage to. Who knows that in our midst may not be a Patti, or a—"

He hesitated, forgetful of the name.

"Florence Nighthawk," suggested a voice from the audience.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, or a Florence Nightingale," said Professor Casteel. "Now," he concluded, "I would like a few words from anyone present who would like to offer any helpful suggestions that may assist us in the proper formation of our class, after which I will ask all present who wish to join it to please come forward."

There was silence in the assemblage for a space; then a voice said, "Let's hear from the teacher," whereupon a group of young ladies tittered audibly, and amid the clapping of hands a medium-sized, boyish-looking young man rose to his feet.

"I'm afraid I don't know enough about vocal culture to suggest anything that might be of any benefit," he said. "I believe we should be guided entirely, in this connection, by the professor, who, no doubt, has conducted singing school many times before."

Professor Casteel inclined his head once again and strummed with his fingers an imaginary tune upon his vest lapel.

"Anyone else?" he asked, as Mr. Simson sat down with a broad smile upon his good-looking face.

"As some of you here knows, I uster sing considerable myself a few years ago," spoke a voice on the far side of the room.

"That's Fields. There won't be no singin' here to-night now he's got goin'," said Dick Dashmore to his seat-mate.

"And I one time conducted singin' school myself down in Buxter. Way I did was have everybody who

wanted t' jine sing a song, so's I'd know whether their v'ices was tenor, bass, alter, or sopranner."

Here he leaned over and expectorated out of the window.

"He's clear his guns fer action," whispered Dashmore. "Is don't let of a chaw fer nothin'."

"Then I lined 'em all up and had 'em go it together."

"That's all very well, sir, but I cannot say that I consider such a method one that an enlightened community would care to adopt, sir."

Jacey Creation, Esquire and Postmaster, had risen and fixed his cold, disapproving gaze on Mr. Fields.

"Arter that I split th' crowd up inter quartets," resumed Field, paying not the slightest heed to the interruption. "Then I split th' quartets up inter duets."

Mr. Creation was looking over his spectacles now and smiling the Creation smile.

"Arter I had tried the duets out, I cut 'em in two agin, so's I had singles. In this way I got t' know my v'ices individually, as it was. Seven of th' young ladies of thet school are prime donners now in th' American States, due more t' their natural talents, o' course, than t' their trainin'. I was goin' t' say thet it might be well t' try my plan here. I believe it's a good way t' larn th' v'ices and find out if th' members kin really sing. I might say thet I'm pleased t' see the interest that's bein' took in this here singin' school. I'm glad t' see such men as Mr. Dustband there takin' an interest. I also see Mr. Malcolm over there alongside Dick Dashmore, and I know without lookin'

round that John Shipley is settin' behind me tickled t' death with hisself. And Mr. Creation there is standin' up, he's so interested, and he's pleased, too, as you all kin see by his face. Now what I want t' tell you—"

Just here Mr. Fields received a sharp poke from a stick thrust through the open window from without, and a shrill voice spoke, in a whisper that everyone could hear distinctly:

"Set down, dad. Don't you know when you've said enough?"

Buz had slipped out and come up upon his father's flank. Fields never thought at any time of disobeying Buz, so down he sat amid wild applause.

"Suppose we have a song from Buz, right now," suggested Mr. Dustband, rising.

"Good!" cried the audience.

Buz climbed through the window and passed over to where Nan Malcolm sat with little blind Dorothy. Then he motioned to Gaff Linkum.

Gaff came forward promptly and the four walked to the platform together.

"There's a quartette such as you don't hear but seldom," whispered a young man to the schoolmaster.

"They're goin' to sing now."

The quartette sang two selections, "Lead, Kindly Light," and "I Was Seeing Nellie Home." Each singer possessed a voice of rare power and sweetness.

After the songs, everybody entered into the spirit of getting the singing class started, and at a late hour the meeting broke up, all happy in the confidence that singin' school would be a success.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GOIN' HOME.

THE night was sweet and still—sweet with the scent of wild blossoms floating through it, still after the hum of live, wild things that had drunk the enjoyment of the summer's day and now rested. A full August moon hung low in the sky; it was an ideal night for "the goin' home."

"On my arm her light hand rested, rested light as ocean foam;
And 'twas from Aunt Dinah's quilting party I was seeing
Nellie home."

Robert Simson, the teacher, hummed the words of the song as he swung along the path. Before him was the tall figure of a girl walking alone.

"Miss Malcolm," he called, softly.

No reply.

"Nan!" he called again. "Won't you wait for me?"

The girl laughed, and stood still until he had reached her side.

"I never pay any attention to anybody who calls me Miss," she said, gazing into his face from under her long lashes.

"Well, I shall never miss you—"

"Sir!"

"I mean, I shall never call you Miss again. I would much rather not, you know."

"I think you made a splendid speech to-night, Mr. Simson." The girl's eyes were dancing. "Just a splendid speech, and you were so unprepared, too."

"I think I did pretty well myself," he answered. "Of course it is not to be expected that a young man like me can compete with such old orators as were present at the meeting to-night."

"Your speech was even better than Mr. Fields', in one way," said the girl, gravely.

"I am indeed glad to hear you say so. In what way was my speech better than my friend Fields'?"

"Oh, it was shorter, you know."

Both laughed.

"Is not this a divine night?" said the girl. "Sometimes I could wish that it were always night, if one might have the big moon, the stillness and the wild honeysuckle's breath with it; it is so restful."

"If you were not an idealist, you would be a fairy," said the man.

"Me a fairy?" She tossed her tangled curls back and laughed with girlish glee. "My, no," she answered. "I couldn't be a fairy; fairies are always so sweet and good, and I am not; I am—"

"All of that, I am sure," affirmed her companion, earnestly.

"Wait till you know me better," she responded, turning up the walk to her home and waving him a laughing adieu.

He walked back along the path upon which the moonlight rested like a soft carpet; back through the still night and the perfume-laden air, alone. And as he walked a voice lingered in his ears as the low, sweet tones of a silver bell may linger and haunt the

hearer long after its notes have ceased to vibrate, and between his eyes and the path's carpet of moonlight was a face.

* * * * *

"Nobody likes horses any better'n I do, but it makes me tired t' hear some people callin' 'em noble an' all sech rot. A hoss ain't any nobler than any other animal, I don't think."

"Yes, they be, Goosecall—yes, they be," asserted Mr. Fields, letting his eye rest tenderly on the old sorrel mare he was driving. "I'll leave it t' either of th' gentlemen in th' back seat, if they ain't."

"What you s'pose a fisherman knows about hosses?" scoffed Goosecall. "Hosses ain't in their line. Ask 'em 'bout sturgeon er sheephead er white-fish er catfish; but don't ask 'em anythin' 'bout hosses. What in thunderation does either Shipley er Sward there know 'bout a hoss?"

"I was raised on a farm, Mr. Goosecall," said Mr. Shipley, in a grieved tone. "At one time I was very familiar with that noble beast of burden, the horse."

"And you found him nobler than th' cow, th' pig, and th' her, no doubt. I s'pose you was also familiar with th' cow, th' pig, and th' hen, Jack?"

"Probably, probably. In a way undoubtedly I were. However, I did not study or cultivate the traits of the animals and fowl you speak of, but I did cultivate the horse."

"And found him th' noblest animal, except man, thet you ever cultivated, no doubt?" asked Mr. Fields, eagerly.

"Except man and a few women," agreed Shipley, feeling in his pocket for his pipe.

"I guess that's because hosses can stand more'n man an' a few women, as you put it," laughed Goosecall. "Eh, Ben?"

"I've allers found women pretty hard t' understand, myself," answered Sward, reflectively.

"Understan' me, gents," said Mr. Fields, "I ain't settin' hosses above women. Women fust allers with me. Next t' them give me a hoss fer nobility."

"An *honest man's* th' noblest work of God," quoted Mr. Shipley.

"I believe thet hones' men *are* sometimes born, same as hones' hosses," said Mr. Fields, reaching over for Mr. Shipley's tobacco. "Thet is t' say, born with th' trait o' honesty in 'em, only, like hosses, they kin be spoiled in the breakin' in."

"Good," cried Mr. Sward, "and quite true, ain't it, Jack?"

"They're just like colts, you know," continued Fields. "Some of 'em need very little breakin', an' agin some on 'em is liable t' get balky an' kick over th' traces. Th' blooded fellers is likely t' belong t' this class. Man kin break in a hoss, but it takes a good woman t' break in a man proper."

"No woman ever broke me in," protested Goosecall. "I can't remember my mother; she died when I was a baby."

"You uster drink an' spend money at a great rate 'bout six years ago," said Fields. "You don't drink much now, an' you don't spend money foolishly at all. How d'you 'count fer th' change, Ed?"

The big man fidgeted.

"Well, my wife hates liquor, you know, an' I need th' money fer th' family," he said, hesitatingly.

"Which proves thet I'm right," said Mr. Fields, smiling over his shoulder. "Get app, gal!"

"I'm sure we are much obliged to you for the lift, Mr. Fields," said Mr. Shipley, as he and Mr. Sward alighted at the home they both shared, and which nestled snugly in a grove of butternuts forty paces from the beach.

"Nuthin' 't all, nuthin' 't all," replied that gentleman. "I've enjoyed th' ride in th' moonlight jest as much as I enjoyed th' singin' school."

"Same here," said Mr. Goosecall.

"We want you t' take home a mess o' whitefish, gentlemen," cried Mr. Sward, diving into a fish shanty and reappearing with a string of fat fish, that glistened like silver in the moon's rays.

"No, no," remonstrated Mr. Fields. "You give me a mess last load I got. I don't want'er rob you."

But Mr. Sward had placed the fish in the back of the democrat, and had clicked to the sorrel mare, anxious to be off, so that Mr. Fields' remonstrances were lost in the noise of the wheels.

"Benjamin," said Mr. Shipley, as they turned into the house, "that man Fields possesses a fund of original ideas, and while he is lacking in the gift and education to properly express those ideas, I am under the impression that, if he so wished, he might yet become a great orator or a writer."

"One thing he does understan'," replied Sward, "and thet's hosses."

CHAPTER XII.

THE FLAT-BOTTOMED BOAT.

FOR nearly a week the old, dun-colored, flat-bottomed boat had lain among the gray rushes on the shore of Lee Creek. She seemed hiding in wait for them, so quietly she rested there, snuggling down among the reeds. Hiding, waiting, dejected, for surely the boys had forgotten her. Think of it! A whole week, seven days, had passed, and neither Buz nor Gaff had come to her as they had promised. So when the warm south wind waved the rushes above and about her, and ruffled the feathers of the red-winged lapwing, or blackbird, as the boys called him, so that he screamed out his "Cheery-o-chee!" in joy, and clung tightly to his cat . . . poor *Betsey* but further rammed her nose into the muck, disconsolate.

No, *Betsey* didn't understand it at all. She had heard the lads plan to hunt bullfrogs on Tuesday. Tuesday, a grand, glorious day, with south wind and bright sunshine, had dawned and faded. All day she had listened for the boys' glad whistle and Gaff's cheery voice, as he called, "Hello, *Betsey*, you ole darlin', have you been lonesome since we left you, eh?"

But the boys had not come. This was strange. Other bright, beautiful days had dawned and passed; and now, grown tired of waiting and watching, the

old boat settled lower among the tangled rushes, a forgotten plaything.

A sleek-coated mink swam close to her side, and even raised himself on his hind legs to peer into her rush-carpeted bow. His bright little eyes shone with happiness, for in his mouth he held a still struggling sun-bass. His wife and family were not very far away, and he knew he would not be scolded, for he had a breakfast for them.

He did not climb upon *Betsey's* wide seat and preen himself, as was his wont. He was in a hurry. He could not even say "Good-morning, *Betsey!*" for his mouth was full and he must get farther away from the water ere his prize would be secure. He simply said, "Hello, *Betsey*, fine morning!" with his eyes, all of which the old boat did not see or heed, for her face was hidden from the light of day.

The red-winged lapwing flew over and sat on a bunch of reeds beside her. "Cheery-o-chee! Betty-o-dee!" he called, joyfully.

Then he grew silent and flew away again, wondering why *Betsey* did not shake herself awake and bow him a welcome.

From the little grove on shore chipmunks chattered and birds trilled her name, but *Betsey* was dejected; she did not heed them.

A pair of beautiful wood-ducks, followed by four tiny, waddling balls, swam out from the pond among the willows, and followed the musk-rat run in which *Betsey* rested out to the creek.

When they were opposite her the drake cast his bright eye aloft and gave a little low quack of alarm. Immediately the four downy balls r'ed and sought a

hiding place along the boat's rush-covered side. The parent ducks fluttered along the run as though lead weights were attached to their legs.

But if the great hawk, swooping down and ever nearer, thought this, he was greatly mistaken. It was but a ruse to lead him away from their babies. Lower he swooped, his great, sharp claws extended to grasp

his wicked, hooked beak partly open for the he was sure of. Suddenly he darted down light and swift as a bullet. Watching him, the big, now high in air and safe, gave a shrill scream. It seemed that his friends, the wood-ducks, were doomed.

There was a mighty splash, and the great, wicked-looking hawk, his feathers well soused, was laboriously striving to rise from the water. Fifty feet out in the clear creek, the ducks were swimming leisurely away.

The hawk struggled to reach the rushes on shore, but the wind was against him, and slowly he was being driven out into the creek. Noting this, the lapwing gave a sharp cry of joy; then, calling shrilly, loudly, he drew near and fluttered just above the struggling bird. O, well did the lapwing know him as did all the marsh birds, for had he not preyed upon their eggs and young, was he not their great enemy? The small bird fluttered above the hawk, giving harsh cries, until from north and east and south and west little black specks came up and grew until the air was full of cries and fluttering wings. Mr. Lapwing had summoned his relatives and neighbors to participate in the enemy's downfall.

Out in the creek the hawk drifted on the slow cur-

rent. His cruel head with its long, curved beak, was held defiantly aloft. He had been in such a position before, and had come off all right. He was in no danger, he thought; he was simply out of his element.

He screamed derision at the puny little birds above him. "Wait until I get to air again," he seemed to say. "You will suffer for this." But when he was in mid-stream, one of the puny birds he had derided darted above him and struck him on the head with its sharp little beak. It did not hurt him much. He screeched defiance. But when another and another darted down, administering sharp little blows as they passed, he grew anxious. He struck back at them with his sharp beak. In vain! They were away before he could reach them.

He struggled nobly as the battle waxed hotter. But as constant drip must wear away a stone, so the continuous onslaught on him was telling. His blurring eyes looked toward shore. It was not so very far off now, but his head was sagging. He struggled. A number of reed-birds, each administering its little quota of killing power, passed him in quick succession. So it was that, when only three feet from shore and safety, the great bird's head sagged slowly forward into the water. The wind carried the brown body over against the reeds, where it lay, its feathers fluttering idly in the breeze.

The reed-birds had won the battle.

* * * * *

"Here she is, Buz, just where she has been all week. Hello, Betsey!"

The flat-bottomed boat quivered and backed her face out of the muck at Gaff's touch.

"Dear ole *Betsey!*" murmured the boy, as he rocked her gently to and fro.

"Here's th' oars, Gaff! Let's get goin'," cried Buz.

"Go it is, sir! Back her up. Now, steady, *Betsey!* Steady, gal!"

"Buz," said Gaff, as they floated down the creek, keeping a sharp eye on either side for bullfrogs. "say that piece th' teacher made up 'bout *Betsey*; will you, Buz?"

"See here, Gaff, you allers make me say th' piece when you are th' one as should say it yourself. You kin say it so much better than I kin."

"But I like t' hear you recite it, Buz. Go on. It'll please *Betsey.*"

Buz laughed.

"Say, it seems sorter crazy in us treatin' this old boat jest like she was really a person, don't it?"

"Well, nobody but jest ourselves knows nothin' 'bout it, Buz. It seems sorter nicer t' let on she is a real person, don't it, now?"

Buz did not answer. He was gazing across the sea of waving reeds, drinking in the warm sunshine and the sweet smell of water plants the south wind was bringing. In the stern, Gaff plied his paddle lazily. They passed great beds of yellow and white pond lilies. They passed colonies of wild, chorusing reed-birds. Everywhere everything was wild and sweet and beautiful.

Watching it all, drinking in its purity and sweetness, the boys were silent for a time. Then, without any attempt at elocution, Buz repeated in a low voice Mr. Simson's little dedication to the old boat:

THE FLAT-BOTTOMED BOAT

65

"Down in th' crick, where cat-tails are wavin'
Welcomes t' blackbirds a-buildin' their nest;
In th' evenin', when bullfrogs with hoarse serenadin'
Disturb th' old plover asleep in her nest,
Buz an' me, don't you see, 'll tranquilly float
In *Betsey*, our darlin' ol' flat-bottomed boat.

"When th' medder-lark soars from his nest in th' clover,
An' th' meller air's filled with a misty perfume;
When th' bullfrog, grown weary o' teasin' th' plover,
Sings a higher, a shriller, more jocular tune,
Buz an' me, don't you see, 'll tranquilly float
In *Betsey*, our darlin' ol' flat-bottomed boat.

"When years have rolled by an' we've grown up t' manhood,
We'll think of these days, an' th' bullfrog's hoarse croak
'Ll bring t' our memories days of our childhood,
An' *Betsey*, our darlin' ol' flat-bottomed boat.
On Life's sea Buz an' me 'll far apart float,
But it won't be in *Betsey*, our flat-bottomed boat."

"Buz," said Gaff, softly, after his friend had finished, "I guess th' teacher understands things all right enough. I guess that's poetry, eh?"

"It seems t' hit my spot, all right," answered Buz. "Only I don't like t' think me an' you, Gaffy, 'll grow up an' get away off from one another like th' piece says. I'd ruther think we'd be together all th' time."

Gaff was silent for awhile. At last he said, slowly:

"O' course we'll be together, Buz. You see, you, not bein' th' poet, don't jest understand th' last verse. What th' teacher meant was we'd be together, but o' course we couldn't expect t' lug *Betsey* aroun' with us everywhere we went. That's what he meant."

Buz turned and looked into Gaff's blue eyes, which shifted a little under his gaze.

"Gaffy," he said, "I don't think there's much harm in lyin' a little now an' then, when it's necessary. I believe you'd lie all day long t' save a feller from a lickin' er anythin' else that'd hur. him. But in this case it ain't necessary. You know what th' last verse means, an' so do I. Now, what we've gotter do is to make th' piece lie. That's th' only way out. I vote we stick together allers; what you say?"

"I say, 'You bet!' t' that."

"Then th' matter's settled. We'll stick together. Steady, Gaff. Swing her 'roun' a little. There's a big frog jes' this side o' them lilies."

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGER.

SIMON DIGGS had just unlocked the "settin' room" door and thrown it open to let the fresh morning air inside when he chanced to see, coming down the road towards his house, a man in a buggy. Mr. Diggs smoothed his one lock of long hair carefully back over his bald spot, and stood smiling a host's smile. Mentally he wondered how long the new arrival would be likely to stop, and if he were a good spender.

"Good mornin'!" he said, blithely, as the stranger drove up. "Fine mornin'!"

"I've seen finer," returned the man, shortly.

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Diggs, pleasantly.

"I want a drink and some breakfast right away, Mr. Hotel-keeper."

"Your hoss looks tired. Driv quite a piece, like as not, eh?"

"Never mind the horse. When can I get a drink and some breakfast?"

"And you look kinder fagged out yourself. Climb out an' I'll put your hoss in th' barn."

The stranger did climb out, saying something not nice to hear as he did so.

"Say, are you deaf?" he shouted, coming close over to Mr. Diggs and speaking almost in his ear.

"A little," answered that gentleman. "I used t' be pretty bad."

"Well, you're pretty bad yet, I guess. Let's go in and have a drink."

"Sartinly!" cried Mr. Diggs, stepping in and unlocking the bar-room door. "What'll it be, sir?"

"Brandy," answered the other, "and give it to me quick."

"Goin' t' stay long?" asked our host, as he watched the other toss the liquor down his throat.

"No."

"Goin' t' push right on, eh?"

"Yes."

"Sir?"

"I said yes."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Diggs, nodding and wiping a tumbler on his shirt-sleeve.

"Do you know a man here by the name of Dashmore?" asked the stranger, leaning over the bar and fastening his black eyes on Mr. Diggs' little gray orbs.

The landlord scanned the dark face of the stranger closely. "No man here by that name, not in this town," he answered.

"Then I've been misinformed."

"Might you be lookin' for the man you was askin' about, this man Dashmore?" asked Mr. Diggs, inquisitively.

"Oh, no. I'm only asking questions for my health. That's all."

"Well, thar's all kinds o' ways o' gettin' health, Mister," returned the landlord, pleasantly. He was not the least disconcerted by the other's rebuffs.

The stranger was a tall, heavy-set man with an evil face; he had a bullet-shaped head, thin lips and pig-

like eyes. A good application of soap and water would have brightened him up considerably. Mr. Diggs, taking him in, said to himself: "He's as greasy as an eel and he moves aroun' like a ferret; don't think he'd stop at nothin' t' gain his ends. He's too good a spender fer a hobo; he must be a gipsy. What does he want 'ith Dick Dashmore? T' make trouble, likely. Well, he'll never find out whar Dick is from me?"

"Thar's breakfast, sir," said Mr. Diggs, as a tall, slim boy with brickdust hair and long, melancholy face opened the bar-room door and gravely and loudly rang a heavy brass bell.

"If that's breakfast, none for me, thanks; I'd have to be a pretty good cannibal to eat that."

The stranger laughed loudly at his own wit. He had been drinking considerably and was in a better humor than when he arrived.

"Go right along in t' your breakfast an' I'll go an' put out your hoss, Mr. —, Mr. —?"

"Never you mind my name. Just call me Mister," chuckled the stranger, as he passed into the dining-room.

"Well, by thunderation!" expostulated Mr. Diggs, smoothing his lone lock over his forehead. "Well, by gum!"

He stood for a moment in perplexed thought; then he slapped his knee, and said, softly: "I've got it, my buck! I know you now."

He tiptoed to the dining-room door and rapped softly. His wife, a comely woman, many years his junior, responded to the summons.

"What is it, Diggs?" she asked, closing the door softly behind her.

He drew her outside to where they might converse comfortably without being heard.

"Say, Clara, do you recognize thet feller?" he asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

"His face seems familiar to me, but I can't place him," answered Mrs. Diggs. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I'll tell you, but you must keep it t' yourself. He's th' captain of a bad gang of men, he is, callin' themselves gipsies, but they're nothin' more er less than outlaws. I know him. He was here 'bout eleven er twelve years ago."

"The very man. I remember the gang now," said the woman, glancing fearfully over her shoulder.

"It was thet gang as left young Gaff Linkum on Dashmore's doorstep, Clara. Thet black rascal has jest been askin' me 'bout Dick."

"Mercy sakes! Did he mention Gaffy, Simon?"

"Not him, by gum. He's too clever fer that, only he might be cleverer, fer he said enough t' put me wise t' his game."

"What does he want, Diggs?"

"Well, it's my opinion he's arter th' boy."

"But he can't have him. What right has that man to Gaffy?"

"Oh, don't ask me. He 'as trumped up a claim, no doubt. Here comes Dick now. I must hide him somewheres. I don't want them two t' meet. Go inside, Clara, an' keep your eyes on th' silverware. I'm going t' put Dick Dashmore down cellar and lock th' door."

"Hello, Dick!" cried Diggs, as Dashmore's closely cropped black head was thrust in at the door. "You're jest th' feller I want. Go down cellar an' tap a keg o' beer fer me; an' Dick, lad, whatever you do, don't make much noise. There's an awful sick man here. He kim this mornin'."

"There, by hickory!" whispered Diggs, as he locked the cellar trap-door and put the key in his pocket, "you'll stay there, my boy, till th' storm blows over. I wouldn't give much fer th' Cap'n if you knowed what I do."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE "HOSS DEAL."

MR. DIGGS, upon going outside to take the horse to the barn, found a tall man in a slouch hat on his knees examining the beast's legs.

"Purty good hoss, I guess, ain't he, Fields?" asked the landlord.

Mr. Fields let his fingers run along a shinbone carefully.

"'Tain't a splint, arter all," he said, as though to himself.

He got up and patted the horse's neck.

"Good gal," he said. Then he opened her mouth and looked at her teeth. "Young, too, but she's been over-driv."

"Who owns her?" he asked, coming over to Mr. Diggs and nodding toward the horse.

"Stranger. He's havin' breakfast."

Mr. Fields stepped over to where his own horse was tied, and smoothed down his croup. He also combed a few burrs out of his mane with his fingers. "Dang you, Hank!" he whispered in the horse's ear. "you never liked me, an' if you'll be good t'-day an' don't balk I'll get you a good berth."

Hank turned back his upper lip and set his ears back.

"He's a bad un, thet feller, ain't he, Fields?" cried Mr. Diggs. "Why don't you get rid of him?"

"Thar's nuthin' in Talbotville kin beat him fer a mile 'cept your brown Dick, Simon."

"He kin go, I know, Fields; trouble is you can't never tell when."

"See here, Simon," said Fields, lowering his voice, "don't you talk so loud. I would trade him fer a hoss o' thet style thar if I could get some difference."

"That hoss thar is wuth two of him."

"Wall, if I should happen tew trade fer thet hoss, gettin' 'bout ten bucks tew boot, I wouldn't mind splittin' up with you, Simon."

When the stranger came out from breakfast Mr. Diggs was diligently polishing the face of the little bar. Fields, his hat on the floor, was reclining in a chair, snoring audibly.

"Got his jag on early," shouted the stranger, nodding toward Fields.

"He ain't got much sense," replied Mr. Diggs, "else he wouldn't get full an' leave thet blood hoss o' his tied like that."

He motioned through the open door toward where bay Hank stood peacefully chewing the tie-post.

"Is that *his* horse?" asked the other, walking to the veranda and looking the beast over.

"His fer sure," replied Diggs, "but he won't be long. Someone will find Fields like he is now, some day, an' swap 'ith him."

"He's game, eh?"

"He'd trade his own mother."

"Wake him up an' we'll have a drink."

"You wouldn't be arter takin' advantage of him by dealin', I hope," asked Mr. Diggs, wistfully.

"What business is that of yours?" answered the stranger, hotly.

"None 't all. Only he's not himself like, an' I feel thet I should take care o' him some," replied Diggs.

"See here," said the stranger, drawing the landlord off into the hall, "that horse of mine is tired out and I must push on to-day. See?"

Mr. Diggs nodded.

"And if I had a fresh horse I could do it. See?" Another nod.

"Well, if you'll help me put this deal through I'll give you five dollars."

"Go inter th' bar an' I'll wake him up," said Mr. Diggs.

Two hours later the beady-eyed stranger was assisted into his buggy by Mr. Diggs and Fields. He was very drunk.

"You needn't be afeared of this hoss," explained Fields. "He's quiet and peaceful as a lamb. I orter asked you twenty-five difference instead of ten; howsomever," he added, "the trade's been made. I won't kick none now."

"'Member, chentl'men, I'll be back some day shune," cried the stranger, gathering up the lines. "Get app!"

For a wonder bay Hank started without a single protest.

"Thar ain't nuthin' kin beat thet feller fer a mile, 'cept Diggs' brown Dick," said Fields, watching the

stranger speedily vanish down the hill; whereupon two bystanders grinned and winked at one another.

Fields sought out Simon Diggs and found him unlocking the cellar door.

"Guess he's gone, eh?" he asked, looking up as Fields came in.

"Yep, he has, Simon."

"All right then, Dick. You kin come up now."

He raised the cellar door and the black, closely cropped head was thrust through the opening.

"Next time you want a keg tapped you kin do it yourself, I guess, maybe." Dick Dashmore swung himself up and glared fiercely at Diggs. "Nice feller you are; ask me to go down cellar and do your work fer you, and keep me locked up down in that dark hole fer nearly three hours. If it wasn't fer Gaff likin' you so much, I'd knock th' rest of that ha'r off yer old pate, I would."

Mr. Diggs took the speaker gently by the arm and led him into the dining-room, Fields following.

"Dick," said Mr. Diggs, "I had t' lock you down thar. That greasy stranger would have got hold o' you an' pumped you dry."

"What about?" asked Dick, looking wonderingly from the speaker to Fields. "What 'ud he pump me fer?"

"He's tryin' to find some trace o' th' baby as was left on your mother's doorstep 'leven years ago, Dick," said Fields, gently.

"Not Gaff! You don't mean as he is lookin' fer little Gaff?" cried the poor fellow, clutching Fields by the sleeve.

"That's it perzactly, lad," said Simon. "If you'd have knowed it, what would you have did, Dick?"

"I don't know," said the poor fellow, looking down. "It might be if he tol' me he was goin' t' take little Gaff away from me, I'd have killed him."

The two listeners exchanged glances and nodded.

"Thet's why we got you down cellar an' kept you thar," said Diggs. "I knowed he was lookin' fer you; an' arter we had got him loaded up a bit, we got his story from him."

"We told him you an' Gaff had gone t' Winnipeg," said Fields. "He only 'bout half believed it, though, so I slipped over t' th' school an' had th' teacher write me a letter from you. It was all 'bout Winnipeg an' so forth. You said as how you liked th' place, an' thet Gaff had gained ten pounds durin' th' week you had been thar. Then I gives a boy a nickel t' deliver this letter t' me right here in th' bar. I didn't have my glasses, an' Simon here let on he couldn't read, so th' stranger offered t' read it fer me. I saw he believed th' story then. He was purty full, but he went over an' studied a map of th' Northwest on th' wall thar. I'm almost sorry I swapped hosses with him now," added Fields, regretfully. "He won't have much use of a hoss now he's goin' up t' Winnipeg hisself, an' might have sold out cheap."

"Here's th' envelope o' th' letter," said Diggs, diving down into his trousers' pocket. "We didn't let him see thet—it hasn' any postmark on it."

The two men laughed, but Dick stood silent, the picture of dejection.

"Say, men," he said at last, "I guess you've did me'n Gaff a good turn. We won't fergit it. An' say, you won't let anybody part us two, will you, men?"

Neither answered. Mr. Diggs turned abruptly toward the bar, as though he deemed a cranky customer was waiting to be served. As for Fields—well, he had a load of fish to sell and it was late. He was blowing his nose vigorously as he passed out.

CHAPTER XV.

"DI."

It was on the first Saturday after the re-opening of school that the boys met in the edge of the wood. It had rained all morning, but now a glorious September sun had come forth to chase away the mists.

Buz sat on a log, Gaff standing beside him. Gaff was speaking.

"If it ain't a good afternoon fer black squirrels, then my name ain't Gaff Linkum."

"I say it's too cloudy. You want a nice sunshiny day ier 'em, Gaff."

"See here, Buz, has it been a-rainin' this mornin' er has it not?"

"Sure it has. What's thet gotter do 'ith squirrels?"

"Only this, they'll be out arter thet shower."

"Get out!"

"All right. If you don't want'er go, you needn't. I kin get Maurice Peel t' go."

"See here, Gaff, don't you be so touchy. You know I'll go."

"Don't make such a fuss about it, then. Get your musket an' let's get movin'."

"Here she is," said Buz, reaching behind a stump and bringing forth a long, murderous-looking fowling-piece. "She kin get 'em, too, an' don't you ferget it, Gaffy."

"Kicks, don't she?"

"Well, thet's nuthin'. She gets th' game."

"I saw two wild turkeys yesterday, Buz."

"No! Where?"

"Down in Ross's woods."

"Well, there's squirrels there, too. S'pose we go there t'-day, Gaff."

"I'm willin'."

The two boys skirted the bush for a piece, then plunged into the underbrush.

After they had gone, a great, ragged form rose from behind a log and gazed after them.

"Ross's woods, eh?" he chuckled. "Wall, that's playin' purty well inter our hands, I guess."

The face that grinned was a dirty, fiendish face. It was pock-marked, and wore a fringe of jet-black, tangled beard.

"We'll get you, my hearties, I guess," laughed the man.

He stepped out into the road and looked up and down.

"Coast's clear, I think," he grunted. "I kin save a long tramp by takin' th' road. Besides, I must get ahead of them boys t' put our fellers on. See!"

He trudged along, swinging a heavy cudgel in his hand and mumbling to himself. Coming to the place, some two miles down, where he was to take to the bush in order to make the short cut to where his companions were in hiding, he came face to face with a woman carrying a light rifle. She was tall and dark, and her eyes were big and black as twin coals. She wore a man's cap and jersey. Her skirt of doeskin reached but to her knees, and she wore leggings of the same material.

"Well?" she said, letting her eyes rest on the man's scowling face.

"Lor', Di, but you a'most scared me t' death!" replied the man.

"Where have you been, Pete?"

"Been? Jest lookin' roun'. 'Thet's all."

"Did you find out where the Captain is?"

"Yep. He pulled stakes an' went t' Winnipeg."

A peculiar smile crossed the woman's face.

"Oh!" she said.

"Yep, he's gone t' Winnipeg arter that kid. He's comin' back soon."

"Has the boy gone there?" she asked, looking away.

"Nope. That's th' fun of it. Th' Cap'n's on th' wrong scent. Th' boy's here."

"And he will stay here," said the woman, in a low voice.

"Ha-ha!" chuckled the man, catching the words.

"You're right, Di; he will stay here."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he's right here now—in this bush. 'Course he'll stay here."

"Will he?"

The tones of her voice chilled him. He shuddered.

"Why, Di," he whined, "you've got another spell on. What's th' matter?"

She looked at him a long time before she answered, but her eyes were gazing beyond him to a far-off past. A whiteness was stealing across her face and wiping the color from her cheeks. Noting it, the man took a step forward.

She raised her rifle a little, and the brute recoiled.

"What's got inter you, Di?" he asked, uneasily.

"Something a murderer's blow deprived me of years ago has returned," she said, calmly. "Shall I tell you what that something is? Listen, then. It is memory."

"Gawd A'mighty!" muttered the man, his face turning yellow.

She smiled at the fright depicted on that ugly, pitted face.

"I remember a night nearly twelve years ago, Pete," she said, in cold tones that sank into him and made him shiver. "It was a wild night of rain and wind"—her great eyes caught and held his shifting little gray ones—"and a befitting one for the tragedy that took place, and in which you participated."

"No—no," he cringed. "I swear I didn't kill him. It was the Cap'n as did it. I—"

"Shut up, you coward!" she cried, scorn flashing from her eyes. "Don't forget that I remember. You were with him. I saw you."

"It was me as saved your life, Di," cried the groveling brute. "It was me as picked you up arter he had struck you down intendin' t' kill you. It was me as tended t' you until you was able t' look arter yerself, it was."

"And it was you who took my helpless babe away and—"

For the first time her voice faltered.

"I swear by all that's holy an' good, Di, I saved th' baby's life, too. Th' Cap'n ordered me t' make away with th' leetle codger that laughed in my face an' patted my cheeks when I was a-carryin' him away. I slunk inter th' town afore it was daylight an' left him

on a doorstep. When I tol' th' Cap'n what I did, he called me a sof'-hearted ninny. Maybe I was, but I'm glad I did what I did, fer—fer—well, fer your sake, Di, an' fer mine," he finished, dropping his eyes.

"I think I understand you pretty well, Pete," said the woman, slowly, "but you can't work on my sympathies. I have nothing for you or the cowardly band you belong to but all the hatred my nature is capable of giving. As for the man, your captain, rest assured I shall be revenged on him for what he has done. You know what that has been. He killed my husband before my eyes. You saw him do it. He tried to kill my baby and me. You frustrated his plans in this, for which I am willing to show you some consideration, although I loathe and despise you."

Her fingers played nervously with the trigger of the gun.

"When do you expect him—your captain—to return?" she asked, at length.

The man started.

"To-morrer er th' nex' day at th' outside," he answered. "He's bent on stealin' th' boy, Di. He says that th' kid has rich relations somewheres an' he's goin' t' fin' out who they are an' offer them th' lad fer a price. Then," he continued, shifting his gaze, "you'll feel better havin' your baby back, won't you, Di?"

"Listen, Pete," cried the woman. "I have an object in remaining with the band until your captain returns. If you're here then you may expect your just deserts. If you are wise, you will be far away from here. I am willing to save you from hanging for what you have unwittingly done for me."

"Don' talk like thet, Di, fer heaven's sake, don'!" cried the wretch, wiping his beaded brow. "Don' say you'll give us up t' th' law. Don' say thet you'll leave us. I loves you, Di, an' if you'll marry me I'll treat you square, I will," he whined.

The woman drew in her breath quickly. Her lip curled in a sneer.

"Have you forgotten what I said about remembering?" she said, coldly.

He had crept toward her with arms outstretched.

"I've forgot everythin' 'ceptin' thet you're beautiful an' I wants you. Won't you have me, Di? I'll treat you square, an' you knows thet is more'n th' Cap'n 'ud do."

The woman let her big eyes rest on the pock-marked face. She noted the brutishness depicted there, the small, shifting eyes under their heavy black brows, the thick sensual lips that a two weeks' growth of beard could not hide, and, lastly, the leer that rested on the tobacco-stained mouth. Almost she could have laughed at the man's presumption.

"You snake!" she said, slowly and distinctly. "I would kill you before I would let you touch me. I may do so, anyway. Remember the lesson your captain learned."

His shifting, pig-like eyes fell before her scornful gaze. He mopped his twitching face with a dirty hand.

"All right, Di," he said. "I wouldn't tech you, seein' it's not t' yer likin'. I didn't mean no harm, you know. Only," he continued, looking away to the bush, "we'd best capture the boy right now, 'cause there's a bunch o' swag in it fer us."

There was a rustle in the foliage close at hand, and two boys came suddenly upon the speaker. An evil smile played upon the man's face, and he gripped his cudgel.

"Di," he whispered, "I'm goin' t' take 'em."

"Stop!" she commanded.

The boys had come forward, and were looking in wonderment on the strange pair before them.

"Boy, come here!"

She held out her hand to Gaff. He came over to her, as though compelled by the light that shone in the woman's eyes.

She took his hand and gazed into his face, and as she did so a new light to the man watching, strange and undefinably sweet, rested upon her own. Her dark, shapely hand swept back the tangled red curls from the boy's forehead. Her fingers rested caressingly upon his neck and cheek. For twelve long years the woman had hungered for what was now being given her.

"Don't cry," entreated Gaff, "don't cry."

His small hand closed upon hers in sympathy too deep for words to convey. She drew him closer to her.

"Would you kiss me once, boy?" she whispered, smiling through her tears into his troubled face.

For answer, Gaff twined his arms about her neck and pressed his warm lips against hers. "I have dreamed of a face like yours lots and lots of times," he whispered back.

The evil smile on the face of the man had turned to one of satisfaction.

"Let her get hungry fer him. That's all we want," he told himself.

With one last, clinging caress upon his freckled face, the woman pushed the boy from her.

"Good-bye!" she said, brokenly.

But when the boys turned to go they found their progress barred by a wicked-looking man with a club.

"No, no, my bucks," he chuckled, with an oath.

"You've gotter come along o' me."

The brute glanced toward the woman, sure of her approval. He looked down the barrel of a rifle.

"Jest my leetle joke, boys," he said, grinning and stepping aside. "Jest tryin' t' scare you. Good-bye, boys."

"Pete," said the woman, after the boys were gone, "you were pretty near the Great Divide a moment ago. It's too bad you won't understand me. You had better take what I have told you seriously. It will be too late, soon."

He tried to meet her gaze, but, as was usual, failed to do so.

"Hell!" he whispered, as he produced a black clay pipe.

The woman was sitting with her face in her hands again.

"She'll hang us all—see if she don't," he said to himself. "She remembers everythin'."

He looked at her as though he would speak further, considered a moment, then, lighting his short pipe, he shrugged his broad shoulders and shuffled away.

CHAPTER XVI.

COUNTERPLOT.

"You see, Gaff, 'tain't natural that she'd take on thet way 'less you was sumthin' t' her."

"Well, I can't understan' it, Buz. Seems like I want t' be near her, too—thet is," noting his companion's look of surprise, "she seems like someone I've knowed a long time; knowed an' liked same as I do you, Buz."

"Humph! I can't see what makes you feel so."

"I don't know, either."

"Say, Gaffy, *maybe she's your mother.*"

Gaff sat down upon a log and clasped his red head between his hands.

"I've thort maybe she was, too," he said, at length, slowly. "I've thort lots o' things lately. I dunno whether I've got a mother er not, an'—an'—seems t' me I'd rather I hadn't one than t' have—"

He looked up into his friend's eyes.

"I understan', Gaffy, I understan'. It is purty tough luck, I guess."

"Gipsies air middlin' low-down people, I s'pose," said Gaff, with a sigh.

"Yes, I've heered they are."

"Well, if I'm jest a gipsy, I'm more no-count even than I thort, Buz. It's been mighty hard right along, ever since I got big enough t' understan', t' feel thet I wasn't anybody an' didn't belong t' no person. It

was purty hard t' know thet no person in pertickler cared very much. But then, a feller kin get uster a thing like thet. Besides, he kin dream sometimes thet he may have a—a good mother an' father sunwhere; I say, he kin dream it, even if he knows right down in his heart thet it ain't so. If he chooses t' think it might be, it don't hurt anybody any, an' if you understood, Buz, you'd know thet it helps th' poor beggar a leetle."

Buz winked hard and, bending down, patted the old setter's head.

"See here, Gaffy, don't you think any more about it," he suggested.

Gaff shook his head.

"Seems like I can't think o' nuthin' else much lately," he replied, sadly.

"Oh, hang it all, Gaff, don't you worry. Everythin'll come out all right."

"Dick says they'll take me away with 'em if I'm not careful. I'm scared sumone'll get hurt, Buz. You know Dick?"

"Dick'll sure do sumthin' if they try thet, Gaffy. Did he tell you t' carry th' gun along when you was away?"

Gaff nodded.

"If they tried t' take you, what'd you do, Gaff?"

Gaff looked at the small gun leaning against a tree, then down at his freckled hands.

A peculiar expression rested on his face.

"Well, Buz, I dunno as anyone'd blame a feller fer pertectin' hisself, even if he was forced t' shoot," he answered, hesitatingly. "Only I don't think I'd do it, although I promised Dick I would."

"Well, I had figured thet you *would*, Gaffy."

"You see, Buz, if I hurt anyone like thet, it'd only be sumthin' else t' stick it here an' come up in my mind whenever I mos' wanted t' ferget it. It'd hurt Dick more'n mos' anythin' I could do, although he don't see it thet way now. It'd hurt you an' Dorothy, dear, leetle Dorothy, thet really thinks I couldn't do anythin' much wrong, Buz."

"Yep, it'd hurt Dorothy, I guess," said Buz, reflectively.

"So I s'pose if they mus' take me along of 'em I'll have t' go, Buz?"

There was a dry sob in the boy's voice.

"No, siree!" cried Buz, standing up straight and doubling up his fists. "Go? Well, I guess you won't go, either. Not if I know it, you won't."

"Well, I don't want'er go, Buz. You know thet, an' I won't go if I kin help it. Only it may be thet they kin compel me to, thet's all."

Buz sat down beside him and started to whistle softly. He was thinking hard.

Suddenly he slapped Gaff's knee sharply.

"I've got an idear," he cried.

"Let's hear it."

"Well, it's this. S'pose we turn the tables an' do a leetle kidnappin' ourselves."

"You're crazy!"

"See here, Gaff. With what we've seen an' what you've told me, I guess we know thet a certain one of the gipsy party wouldn't lose no sleep over bein' parted from th' gang. You know who, eh?"

He leaned over and looked into his friend's eyes.

"I guess I know. Well, go on."

"What we'll do is, get her away from 'em and lead 'em a race."

Gaff rose and paced up and down the leaf-strewn ground.

"Jimminy!" he exclaimed, after a time. "Oh, jimminy!"

"That's right. I knowed you'd come my way. Now, let's make our plans."

"Better talk low. They might be right here in th' bush listenin'. Let's whisper."

With their heads close together, the boys in low tones talked over their plans. At length, everything being arranged, they stood up.

"What I'd like t' know is this," said Gaff Linkum, as they sought the open. "How'll *she* take it?"

"How'll *she* take it? Well, you great, big ninny, I kin tell you how *she'll* take it. She'll thank th' Lord fer deliverin' her out of th' hands of thet murderous gang, she will. Then—then—oh, see here, Gaff, you orter know thet she wants you more'n anythin' er everythin' else in th' world. Didn't she cry an' blubber over you? Didn't she hold you tight t' her? I say, didn't she, now?"

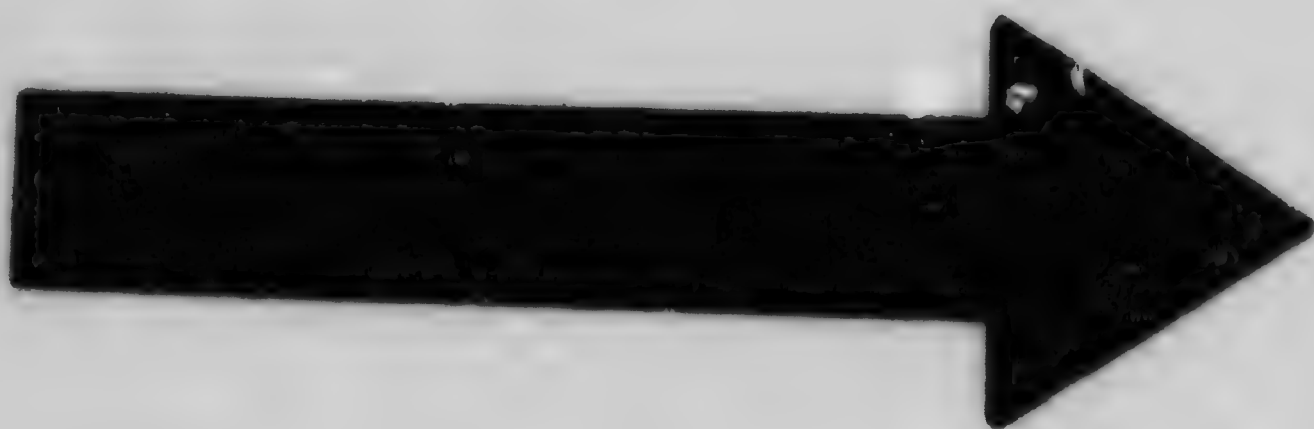
"An' you," Buz went on, "how'd you take it? I say, how did *you* take it all? Well, you might have been uster it 'cordin' t' th' way you acted. Hang it all, you're her—you know who you are, all right."

"It seemed nice t' have her hold me t' her like she did."

Gaff's face was crimson as he spoke.

"It all seems so strange now, an' I guess—I—guess, Buz, I was jes' as hungry fer a hug of thet kind as she was."

"Well, you're goin' t' get lots of 'em. Oh, let me holler er I'll bust. Hip! Hip! Hurrah!"

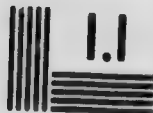


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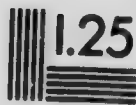
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CHAPTER XVII.

THE INVITATION OF SWARD & SHIPLEY.

Sandtown, Sept. 8.

Dear Sir, Madam or Both:—

You are invited' to participate in the lifting of the nets, to take place on the afternoon of September 10, at 4 o'clock. Boats will be at our landing for your accommodation, and will proceed shortly after the hour mentioned to our pound-nets, where such of the finny tribe that may be imprisoned therein will be conveyed to the boats. Conveyances will start from the Commercial Hotel for the beach at 3 o'clock, sharp.

We remain, Sir, Madam, or Both,

Your humble servants,

Sward & Shipley.

THIS invitation, written in Mr. Shipley's master hand, was sealed and delivered in person to a great number of the good people of Talbotville by his admiring partner, Mr. Sward.

Dick Dashmore was digging potatoes behind the house when Gaff Linkum came around on a hop, skip and jump.

"Oh, Dick," he cried, "we've got an invite."

"Who has?" asked Dick, looking up in alarm.

"Why, us—me'n you, Dick."

"What'd you say we had, Gaff?"

"Why, an invite t' the liftin'."

"What's a liftin'?" asked Dick, mopping his brow on his sleeve.

"Why, we go out t' th' nets, Dick, an' see' em lift 'em an' take out th' fish. Oh, I say, it's fun, though."

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"Well, we'll go, then," said Dick, looking relieved.

"It's tomorrer arternoon, Dick. Buz's daddy is goin' t' drive us down t' th' beach in his democrat. Dorothy an' Nan's goin', an' so's Mollie Gray, an' Mr. Dustband an' Auntie Dustband, an'——"

"Never you min' namin' any more, Gaffy. I guess most likely all th' town'll go, eh?"

Dick broke off a "fox-tail" and chewed it meditatively.

"Which one of th' two do you think th' mos' of, Gaffy?" he asked, at length. "Nan er Mollie Gray?"

"I don't know, Dick," answered Gaff. "You see, they are so different."

"They be thet."

"Nan's jest like a burst of sunshine, er a breeze offen th' lake. Leastways, she makes you think of them things."

"Yep, she do," affirmed Dick.

"T'other one, Mollie, puts you in mind o' sumthin' dreamy an' restful, like a quiet pond beneath th' willers, er sumthin' like that."

"Sumthin' quiet an' restful. Yep, thet's it, Gaffy."

"Well, one loves th' breeze an' one loves th' shadder, Dick. He loves th' sunlight same's he loves th' quiet places. There is times when he wants th' sunshine most; o'her times he likes t' steal away by hisself t' t'other place where it's lonely an' quiet."

Dick looked admiringly at the boy before him.

"No wonder everybody's fond o' you, Gaffy," he said. "You ain't like any other kid I ever saw."

"Guess it's on account of my red hair. Buz says it's gettin' redder every day."

"Fan heered you talkin', I guess, Gaffy. See, here she comes, an' she's bringin' th' pups 'ith her."

Down the path from the woodshed came a long-haired setter and behind her wobbled and staggered seven round, woolly puppies.

"Th' leetle beggars," said Gaff, fondly. "Look at 'em 'umble, Dick. They're so fat they can't keep up t' her."

The old dog came slowly down the path and walked gravely up to where Gaff sat on a log.

"Good ol' Fan," said the boy, lifting her long, silken ears caressingly.

She put her head on his knee and looked with big, brown eyes into Gaff's blue ones.

"She sure does think a lot o' you, Gaffy," said Dick.

The boy pulled the dog's head over against his face.

"No more'n she does o' you, Dick," he replied. "I'm more her age, thet's all; an' we romp an' hunt more together'n you an' her."

"Maybe thet's it."

Dick took up 'is fork and resumed his task of digging potatoes. There was a glad, satisfied expression on his face.

Gaff picked up the fattest of the pups, and, followed by the mother and the balance of the family, went over to the shed.

Coming back after a time, he stood and watched Dick with master hand turn the potatoes from the hills, a thoughtful expression on his freckled face.

"What you thinkin' 'bout, Gaffy?" asked Dick.

"I was thinkin' 'bout th' woman I told you of," said Gaff.

"I guess she was a gipsy, Gaffy; I can't think why

she should act so queer, though. Gipsies don't hug boys much an' cry over 'em like she done."

"I can't forget her, Dick; her face is right afore my eyes now."

"You jest fancy it, I guess, Gaffy. I'm sorry thet ever happened."

"I ain't sorry, Dick, 'cause if I had a mother I believe she would be jest like thet woman."

"Gaffy," said Dick, solemnly, "you *have* got a mother somewhar."

"Good-day, gents!" spoke a whiny voice at the gate.

Turning, our friends saw a ragged, dirty individual with pock-marked face, scowling in at them.

"That's th' man as tried t' scare me an' Buz," whispered Gaff.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DICK TURNS THE TABLES.

"KIN I get a drink o' water?" asked the ragged individual, as he unlatched the gate.

Dick's face turned a dark scarlet, known to not a few of the boys as a danger signal. He dropped his fork and walked quickly to the gate.

"Thare's a hoss-pond jest aroun' th' next corner," he said, his jaws setting. "If you'll jest come along o' me, I'll show you th' way."

The man backed away from him.

"Here, you let go o' me," he said, savagely, as Dick's strong hand gripped his shoulder. "You'll be sorry if you don't," he cried, slipping his hand into his breast-pocket.

"Take care, Dick! Watch him!" cried Gaff, noting the movement.

But Dick's hold simply tightened until the other winced in pain.

"I'm watchin' him, Gaffy. Don't you be alarmed," he answered.

With a curse the man drew from his pocket a long pistol, and, pointing it straight at Dick's face, pulled the trigger. There was no explosion; the hammer had fallen on an uncapped nipple. The next moment the would-be murderer was on the ground, with Dick's strong fingers digging into his windpipe.

"So thet's your trade, is it? Killin' people, eh?" Dick shook him viciously. "I reckon I'll teach you

sumthin', Mister. Gaffy," he called, "go inter th' shed an' bring me thet coil o' rope. Your gun is nonester than you air, Mr. Tramp. It's ashamed t' go off, I reckon."

"Sumone fixed it, curse 'em!" replied the other, sullenly.

"Well, whoever they be, they've been purty good t' me. Get up!"

The man struggled to his feet, assisted none too gently by Dick.

"What you goin' t' do 'ith me?" he asked, tugging at his bonds.

"I haven' jest decided yet," answered Dick, grimly. "What'll we do 'ith this, Gaffy?"

"He orter have his face punched good an' hard," answered Gaff, his own freckled face wearing a look of disgust. "I reckon, though, thet wouldn' hurt him really as much as a good duckin'. Let's pitch him in th' snake-pond over thar in th' willer swamp."

"Th' snake-pond? What you mean by snake-pond?" asked the man, with a shudder.

"It's a pond o' stinkin' water over thar in th' bush a piece. We'll show it t' you," said Dick. "Come along!"

"Thar's all kinds o' snakes an' water lizards an' things like thet in it," said Gaff. "We're goin' t' throw you in it an' keep you in it."

"Fer the love o' God, don't," pleaded the man. His face was a greenish white from fright. "Anythin' but thet, fellers. Give me up t' th' constable, put me behind the bars fer life, only don't take me whar thar's snakes."

"Don't you like snakes?" asked Dick, pleasantly, as

he pushed the other before him. "Thar's all kinds whar you're goin'. Leetle garter-snakes, an' big spotted wompers, an' milk-snakes, water-snakes, black-snakes an' a few rattlers. 'Th' rattlers won't show up, maybe, bein' kinder timid, but all th' rest of 'em 'll be waitin' fer you."

"An' air you goin' t' put me in thet slimy water along of 'em?"

"Thet's th' intention," answered Dick.

In a short time the pond, a small body of green, stagnant water lying in a thick cluster of trees, was reached. In reality there was nothing more loathsome than a few frogs and turtles to be found there, Dick's idea being to instil terror into the mind of the man he was leading.

As the trio emerged from beneath the trees surrounding the pond, a big turtle slid with a splash from a mossy log into the water.

"Thet was Cronko, th' big king womper," said Gaff. "He's been here a long time, Cronko has. He's a fine snake."

"Oh!" exclaimed the man with a shiver. "Don't put me in this pond, k'ase, any other one but this."

Several other turtles that had sought the weed-coated water at the approach of the intruders stuck their heads up at this juncture.

"Look at 'em! Look at 'em!" cried the man, the perspiration standing in beads on his brow. "Boys," he pleaded, "I was bit by a snake wunst, an' it'll kill me if you throw me inter thet pond."

"Our idea is t' kill you, o' course, you perhaps know," said Dick. "Now, air you all ready?"

"Only let me off this time, an' I promise I'll not moles' you er th' kid agin."

"No, I guess you won't moles' anybody much agin."

"I'll tell you sumthin' you'd give a lot fer t' know."

"Get hold o' th' rope, Gaffy," cried Dick, ignoring the other's pleadings. "I see Cronko's head a-twitchin'. He's gettin' anxious. We don't want him comin' out at us."

"Ugh!" shuddered the man, his teeth chattering.

"Now, my hearty, I hope you won't carry no hard feelin's inter th' next world," said Dick. "You tried t' get me fust, you know, an' it's my turn now."

"Listen t' me," shrieked the poor fellow, falling on his knees, too terrified to stand upright. "If you want'er kill me, do it some other way, but fer God's sake don't put me among them snakes, an' not in this pond—there's a *murdered man suck in it*."

Gaff made as though he would speak; a look from Dick kept him silent.

"I'm sorry, mister, but it's gotter be this way," said Dick, with a sigh.

"Listen!" cried the wretch, imploringly. "If you love th' boy thar, spare my life, an' I'll help you t' save him."

"What d'you mean by that?" cried Dick, gripping the speaker's arm.

"They will steal him from you, as sure as th' skies is above you," went on the man. "I alone knows their plot, an' I'll tell you all, if you let me off."

A dark look settled on Dick's face.

"Come out in th' clearin' an' I'll listen t' your story," he said. "If I'm satisfied thar's a plot when you get through, an' thet you've peached proper, I'll give you another chanst."

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE LAKE

THAT night Dick and Gaff lay awake long hours talking matters over. What they had learned from the unkempt stranger was enough to make them feel the keenest of anxiety. The band of gipsies encamped in Ross's woods had a plan formed to abduct Gaff, whom they claimed as one of their own people.

Why they chose stealth in their undertaking rather than to come openly and lay claim to the boy was known only to themselves. Dick had released his captive upon the latter's promise to disclose to him anything further pertaining to their plans that might come to his notice. It is true that he reposed little confidence in the gipsy's promise, but he had no alternative. He felt sure, however, that the man spoke some truth, and the long musket was loaded with buckshot and placed conveniently near to the boys' bed that night. As to what the gipsy had said about a murdered man being sunk in the pond, the boys paid very little attention to it. Dick's injunctions to Gaff were to keep close to him for a time, and not to wander, as was his wont, at any time far from the village.

The gipsy had said that the Cap'n had sworn to get Gaff. Who the Cap'n was the boys could not conjecture. He had also spoken of a woman named Di, who, for reasons known only to herself, wished the boy to remain where he was. For, be it known, the gipsy had not compromised his comrades further than the disclosing of their plans necessitated. A certain code of honor among the band kept him silent as to the

identity of the woman Di and of the man he called Cap'n.

Before going to sleep, Dick and Gail agreed to keep what they had learned to themselves, at least for a time.

On the afternoon of the lifting they were both early at the beach, where a large number of the villagers were assembled awaiting the launching of the big boats.

"Hello, Dick!" called Mr. Malcolm. "Going to see the fun, eh? What's the matter, lad? You look worried. Feeling all right, I hope?"

"Feelin' fine," answered Dick. "Am a leetle worried, though. I'll tell you 'bout it some time soon, 'tween things don't shape right."

"All right, Dick. I'll do what I can to help you. Remember to tell me if you want help."

Mr. Malcolm turned to speak to some new arrivals, and Dick sauntered over to where Mr. Shipley was placing the rollers beneath one of the boats.

"Quite a crowd," he remarked.

"Tolerable, tolerable," answered Mr. Shipley, closing one eye and sighting along the rollers to see if it was under straight.

"I see you have 'most all th' town down."

"Yes. With one exception our invitations have been unanimously accepted, Richard."

"I'm glad t' hear it."

"That exception," said Mr. Shipley, producing his pipe, "or, to be more correct, I should say that refusal of acceptance to attend our lifting, was made by a party you know well, sir."

"Yes, I don't doubt," said Dick.

"That party was Mr. Creation."

"No!"

"Yes."

"Maybe too busy t' come, er sumthin', eh?"

"No, that is not the reason. I could tell you why he is not here, Richard, but my modesty forbids my doing so."

"He's a funny ole feller," suggested Dick.

"He may be so. I will not gainsay your remark, Richard. I do know, however, that he is a very jealous-minded man. He is decidedly averse to believing that others possess more knowledge along subjects in general than he himself does."

"He's jealous o' you, you mean?"

"I haven't really said that he was, you know. Richard, but I believe that it is commonly thought that he is, sir."

Mr. Shipley hurried away to see if any of the other boats required any attention on his part, and Dick walked along the beach, accosting many of those assembled there, for he was well known to all.

Finally, Mr. Sward came flitting among the crowd.

"Boats all ready, ladies and gentlemen!" he cried. "Divide yerselves inter three parts, please. Each boat'll hold forty people."

Professor Casteel, wearing a linen duster that swept the sand at each step, was captain *pro tem* of the boat named *The Lizzie*. He stood in her bow and extended a helping hand to each one as they climbed aboard. The second boat, the *Nete Dublin*, was captained by Mr. Sward, and the third, the *Sea Foam*, by Mr. Shipley.

"Now, my dear people," spoke Mr. Shipley, "kindly sit still in your seats. We are just about to be released from our moorings. Are you all ready? Aye, aye, is it? Then, men, let 'em go."

There was a creak, and a cry from the ladies, as the boats dashed on their rollers across the ten yards of hard sand dividing them from the lake's edge and struck the water with a mighty splash. There they floated gallantly, and when a few oars were manned, they skimmed over the smooth water like five things that had entered into the spirit of the fun.

Professor Casteel gathered the skirts of his duster about him, and standing, Columbus-like, in the stern, pilot-oar in hand, struck up the song, "A Home on the Mighty W."

"That's right," shouted Mr. Sward. "Everybody sing. Let's enjoy ourselves. Ain't that what you say, Jack?"

"Certainly, let us make merry," responded Mr. Shipley. "Jine in the chorus, everybody."

"You're not much o' a singer, John," said Mr. Fields, with frankness, when, after the first verse, Mr. Shipley hung a little behind, retarded by his asthma. "You should come t' th' singin' school more regular."

"I was considered a proficient tenor at one time," Mr. Fields.

"Quite awhile ago, I don't doubt. Might it be when you was a boy, John?"

"I think Mr. Shipley has a sweet voice," said Nan Malcolm. "I am sure he could surprise us with its power, if he so wished."

"Won't you sing us a song, Mr. Shipley?" asked Mr. Simson.

"Oh, yes, please do," begged Mollie Gray.

"Go on, Jack, give us a song. I'll help you out on the chorus," urged Mr. Malcolm.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Shipley, stroking his forked beard thoughtfully.

"Ahoy, brigs *Lizzie* and *New Dublin*!" shouted Mr. Malcolm. "Come over closer. Captain Shipley is going to favor us with a song."

The boats drew alongside the *Sea Foam*. Oars were shipped, and, after silence had been enjoined, Mr. Shipley, advancing to the prow, bowed gravely and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, in acceding to the request of friends that I sing you a song, I do so with commingled pleasure and pain."

"He's got th' toothache er sunthin'," whispered Buz to his chum.

"Order, boys!" commanded Mr. Dustband.

"I say I do so with commingled pleasure and pain," repeated Mr. Shipley. "I pray, therefore, that understanding as you all do how loath I am to sing you a ditty, you will in no way misconstrue my action. I myself believe that a man cannot possess too many accomplishments; at the same time I have no right to suppose that all others share my opinion in this connection. I would like it, therefore, to be thoroughly understood that I favor you with a little song solely because you are my guests, as it were, and it is my place to give you whatever amusement lies in my power. Should you consider my song above the ordinary standard, I feel that you will willingly grant me this one request of saving nothing whatever about it to anyone outside our party, particularly to our esteemed townsman and Postmaster, Mr. Creation."

Mr. Shipley stood erect, cleared his throat, and commenced, in a high-pitched, wavering note a ditty he had himself composed, entitled, "Betsey Spanker."

It was a love-ditty with a touch of pathos in it. The pathos was well brought out by the singer. The air

of the song was a slow, weird measure, with humps in it here and there, to give it passion. It was more a chant than a tune; there were in it the low tremors of terrible sadness, there ran through it high, shrill notes of victory over despair.

The words of the song were pathetic also. Mr. Shipley explained that they were written under trying circumstances, to which remark Mr. Dustband replied, kindly, that he had no doubt they were. The words ran:

A maiden sweet and all forlorn dwelt on an island's foam,
Her name was Betsey Spanker wherever she did roam;
Her father was a pirate bold, her mother was also,
And the sky was dark and gloomy, and the merry winds did
 blow,

And the merry winds did blow,

And the merry winds did blow.

The sky was dark and gloomy, and the merry winds did blow.

This maiden had a lover bold; his name I dare not tell;
And one day from the island in the sea this maiden fell;
But this gallant lover spied her from his vessel far away,
And he plunged in and saved her from the cruel waves that
 day,

From the cruel waves that day,

From the cruel waves that day,

And he plunged in and saved her from the cruel waves that
 day.

Now, when the maiden's father heard about this gallant bold,
He gnashed his teeth in fury as he paced his vessel's hold.
"Go forth, my noble seamen," he cried, "and bring to me
The man who saved my daughter from the wild waves of the
 sea.

From the wild waves of the sea,

From the wild waves of the sea,

The man who saved my daughter from the wild waves of the
 sea."

Then across the foaming billows the pirate seamen sped,
And tore from the fair maiden's arms the man she fain would
wed.

"Come back," she cried, "my lover! Why do you leave me
so?"

And the sky was dark and gloomy, and the merry winds did
blow,

The merry winds did blow,

The merry winds did blow,

The sky was dark and gloomy, and the merry winds did blow

His handsome head they severed. His limbs they severed, too,
And they cast his headless body in the waters deep and blue.
And to the maiden watching with a grief words fail to tell
Her lover threw a good-bye kiss and waved a last farewell,

And waved a last farewell,

And waved a last farewell,

Her lover threw a good-bye kiss and waved a last farewell.

Years have passed, and still the maiden dwells on the island's
foam,

While her pirate ma and father about the sea do roam;
But grief has crazed the maiden, and nothing does she know,
Save the skies are dark and gloomy, and the merry winds do
blow,

And the merry winds do blow,

And the merry winds do blow,

The skies are dark and gloomy, and the merry winds do blow.

At the conclusion of Mr. Shipley's song hearty
applause was tendered, also congratulations. Then
with the cry, "Away to the nets!" the boats bounded
on.

CHAPTER XX.

AN OLDEN STORY.

It was midnight when the boats reached shore again. The company had enjoyed themselves, with one or two exceptions. Mr. Malcolm was one exception. Professor Casteel was the other. They had been seasick.

"It was the smell of the fish did it for me," explained the latter, and Mr. Malcolm, looking carefully about to see that there was no one within hearing, blew his big nose gently and thankfully as he said:

"That might have helped, Casteel, but do you know what made me sick most of all? Well, it was Shipley's song. Dad!" he continued, "wasn't it awful? Think of it, Casteel. Girl falls off an island into the sea and is rescued by a man miles away from her who jumps into the brine and does the act. Eh? Isn't it rot, now--eh? Then the maiden's pirate father cuts the poor beggar's head and arms off and casts him overboard, and the song says he threw his sweetheart a good-bye kiss and waved her a fond farewell. How the mischief, I want to know?—Hello, Nan! What's up, now? Want to go home, eh?"

"Poor old daddy," said the girl, seating herself on the sand beside the two men. "You always get seasick every time you see a boat, don't you?"

"It's a fact, Casteel—it's a fact," confessed Mr.

Malcolm, passing his arm about his daughter's waist and smoothing the hand that had sought his affectionately. "Dad! I get sick the easiest you ever saw. Can't look at a glass of water or a toy boat without losing—"

"Your dignity," assisted Nan, with a laugh.

"Yes, my dignity, and more than that, usually."

"I seldom get sick," asserted Mr. Casteel, with a brave attempt at a smile. "To-night is an exception. I might say I have never been seasick before."

"It's no disgrace, no disgrace in the world," said Mr. Malcolm. "Anybody's liable to get seasick, my friend. Hello! There go the folks. Guess we'd better hustle, or get elected to walk. Come on, professor. Nan, I can beat you running to the rigs."

"I'm not going to ride up," said Nan.

"No?"

"I've been asked by a nice young man to walk home." She smiled, her teeth gleaming white in the moonlight.

"Now, that isn't fair, I say!" cried Mr. Malcolm. "Nan, I forbid you to do it unless you find me a girl and let me walk home with *her*."

"You've had your fling, my dear," cried Nan, pushing him gently before her. "You can't live the joys of life twice, you know, daddy."

"And there's some of them I wouldn't care to live twice, I tell you."

"And others of them you would? Eh?" She laughed provokingly.

"I feel that I would much rather ride to-night," said Professor Casteel, sighing.

Mr. Malcolm pinched his daughter's arm.

"The professor doesn't feel any too strong," he explained.

"On the contrary, I feel quite strong," asserted Mr. Casteel, bristling.

"Yes, yes, but not in the regions of the stomach, eh? Did I ever tell you the story of how the Jew woman saved her husband from being seasick by reminding him that his dinner had cost him a dollar?"

"Please don't tell it," begged Mr. Casteel, with a grimace.

"Dad, I have told it. That's all there's to it," said Mr. Malcolm, grinning broadly.

"Come on, Malcolm, an' all th' rest o' you folks!" called Mr. Fields. "Ol' Jim an' Nell here be gettin' restless."

"Then let 'em go," cried Mr. Malcolm, as he tumbled into the rig. "Never mind Nan and the teacher. Had to promise Nan I'd let her walk home along with the teacher before she would come. Get app!"

"Is he not the greatest tease?" said the girl.

Mr. Simson laughed as he answered, "He is like a breeze from the sea."

"You don't mean that he is soft?"

"I mean that he is refreshing. You have a good father, Nan."

"I have the dearest ner girl ever had."

"He—he has a fine daughter, too, Nan."

They were walking home along the wide gravel road, the big sinking moon full in their faces. Gazing into the girl's blue eyes, noting the heavy wavy hair upon her temples, and the sweet, wistful expres-

sion on her face, he thought her all a girl could possibly be that was sweet and good.

"What did you say about his daughter?"

"I said he has a fine daughter."

She did not attempt to reply. She simply looked at him frankly and went forward without a word.

Several times during the walk home he tried to make her talk, but Nan was in one of her silent moods. She did not care to talk. Before he left her she held out her hand when she said good-night. He took it wondering. It was not her custom to shake hands with him when they parted.

"Nan," he said, softly, "tell me why you act so?"

"I—I want you to understand without asking," she replied.

"I'm afraid—I won't understand," he said.

She sighed faintly.

"I might have known that you would not," she replied.

"Nan, Nan," he whispered, clasping the little hand in both of his, "you make what I wish to tell you very hard. I love you, Nan."

"Oh!" she gasped, drawing away.

"Surely, surely you have guessed it?"

"I was beginning—to guess it."

"Do you love me in return, dear?"

"Oh, this is what I would have saved you," she answered. "It is hard to tell you the truth. I do not—"

"Then never mind, Nan. It's all right. I had no right to think it. I—I never thought it. I hoped—that's all."

Looking into her face, he wondered how one so

care-free could feel as this girl could feel. She was only sorry for him, but it was a sorrow that seemed to fasten upon her. He began to realize what he was losing.

"Nan," he said, "you are the sweetest and best girl I have ever known. I know it is useless for me to hope. I will not hope, but you will be always my friend, won't you, Nan?"

"Always," she answered.

"Will nothing change you?"

She smiled.

"If all the world turned against you—I would be loyal."

"Ah, what a great, true heart you have, Nan. Are all women's hearts as loyal, I wonder?"

"Just as true, just as loyal, I believe—and they are broken every day," she answered.

He wondered if she were right. He could picture a woman like this one clinging, clinging hopelessly to an ideal which she had fashioned and her trust in which nothing could shatter. So that was how hearts were broken.

"Little girl," he said, "I trust it may not be your lot to suffer even a little bit. I hope you will love someone who will understand the greatness of all the love your nature can give him."

"Who knows?" she answered, and turned away.

CHAPTER XXI.

STRANGE HART, EVANGELIST.

THERE was going to be a revival. So said the little poster hung conspicuously in the post-office. So the minister had announced from the pulpit on Sunday. So the villagers were saying to one another. A revival, a real, old-time rally against evil by the good Methodist people of Talbotville, assisted, it was hoped, by the other denomination, the English church. A real evangelist was coming, one whose name and fame had preceded him; a man who was giving his young life to the grand work of saving souls, the Rev. Mr. Stover had said.

And Rev. Mr. Stover was at the post-office, decked out in his long coat and silk hat, for the evangelist was expected on the stage, and the stage was due to arrive at any moment.

In Malcolm's care, just across the way, Nan Malcolm and Mome Gray watched the crowd outside the post-office with interest.

"Aren't people curious, though?" said Nan. "Look, Mollie, you see that short, stoop-shouldered man with the pitted face? Well, he's about one of the wickedest men in these parts, it is said."

"I think Mr. Malcolm was telling me of him," her companion replied. "Is his name not McDonell?"

"Yes. He is awfully bad. He beats his poor wife dreadfully," said Nan, with an utter disregard for proper English in her excitement.

"Does he live in the village, Nan?"

"No; he lives in Sandtown. You know the little settlement about two miles below Mr. Shipley's place, on the Lake Shore.

"And the man who is talking so much—the one with the long beard?" asked Molly.

"Oh, that is Deacon Ringgold. He has wanted a revival here for a long time."

Mr. Malcolm came over and, putting an arm about the shoulders of each of the girls, looked out of the window.

"Quite a gathering, eh?" he asked. "The gentleman expected ought to feel flattered."

"Well, they are all here, anyway," laughed Nan. "There's Mrs. Fields, Mrs. Stover, Mrs. Wilkinson, and Mrs. Diggs, who all seem to be anxious to give him a welcome."

"And your mother is just inside with Miss Dustband," said Mollie.

"Yes, and I see Miss Simson through the window," laughed Mr. Malcolm. "Better go across, girls. Some one of the young ladies is going to capture the evangelist, so better get in at the start."

Nan turned upon him, laughing.

"You poor old daddy!" she said. "They can have him, can't they, Mollie dear?"

"I don't just know," answered that young lady, shaking her little head. "He might be, oh, ever so nice, you know, Nan."

"I'll tell you what he will be like," said Nan. "He will be of medium height. His face will be red and fleshy. His hair will be light and long and straight. Yes, it will be straight." This thoughtfully. "I don't

know what color his eyes will be, but they will be those cold, dead kind, I know, and his hands will be cold, too. I don't want to shake hands with him."

"Oh, but you will have to," laughed her companion. "As choir leader, you will be much with him, Nannie dear."

"Then his face will have that solemn, peaceful expression that one sees on the faces of pictured Puritans," added Nan. "I know it will give me a chill."

"I love those old pictures you speak of," said Mollie. "Perhaps I shall—"

"Lose your heart?" finished Nan. "Yep, the little city gal will maybe lose her heart."

"Yes, that's his name—Strange Hart," said Mr. Malcolm, who had gone to wait upon a customer and returned in time to hear only the last word. "Peculiar name, eh, girly?"

"It's a pretty name, I think," said Nan.

"I like common ones better," chuckled Malcolm, his eyes twinkling. "Take Robert Simson, for instance. Good old stand-by, Simson."

He pinched Mollie's cheek and retreated.

"He's a great tease, dear," laughed Nan, taking her friend's hands in her own. "He knows how much Mr. Simson admires you, I guess."

"Don't, Nan. You shouldn't joke about—about Mr. Simson. Why, I have met him only once or twice, and really you know as well as I do that it is you he cares for."

"Me! Poor little me!" sighed Nan. "No, dear—a little fancy. You see, we like one another hugely, but he is not—"

"Your style?"

"No, he is not my style."

"I think he is good and earnest and true, Nan."

"Of course he is. That's my objection. I like a man who is the— Now, if he were the very opposite of this—"

"You don't mean to say that you would have him the very opposite of what he is?"

"No—not unless I wished to care for him, Mollie."

"I just can't understand you, dear."

"Don't try to, sweetheart," cried Nan, tightening her embrace. "Nobody understands me. I can't understand myself."

Mollie looked at her with big, solemn eyes.

"You don't like fast young men do you, dear?" she asked, gravely.

"I—I like them perhaps a little better than the slow ones, I think," answered Nan, tossing her curls. "I believe they make better men if they're properly handled."

She laughed at the expression of horror on her friend's face.

"There, love, of course I don't like fast young men. I don't like any young men. I don't want a fast young man. I don't want any young man. All I want is my own little Mollie."

"You have captured her, heart and soul, Nannie."

"But I can't hold her, I fear. There, there, we won't worry until we have to; but, Mollie, if I were to love a man, I think it would be one who—who needed taming."

"I see the people stampeding. Stage must be coming," cried Mr. Malcolm, running to the door. "Yes, there she is. Now, girly, fix your beau-catchers and put on your best smiles. He arriveth."

Amid a cloud of dust the stage swung up to the post-office. There was a moment of breathless expectancy. Then a tall, broad-shouldered man leaped to the sidewalk.

He was dressed in white flannel shirt and light trousers, and carried his coat on his arm. His face was noble-looking, but haggard, as though he had passed through a recent illness. His head was poised on his great shoulders by a short, abruptly curving neck. His jaw was wide and square, his somewhat sunken eyes were big and gray, and as they ran along the little sea of faces before him, there was a tender, true light in their depths. The Reverend Mr. Stover nodded to him in a friendly way, and, leaning over, looked into the stage.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said. "Were you accompanied by a fellow-passenger? We were expecting another gentleman on this stage."

The man addressed lifted his hat and wiped his wavy brown hair on a cotton handkerchief. He smiled down upon the minister, whose beam of welcome had given way to a look of disappointment.

"No," he answered, and the girls in Malcolm's store could hear his every word distinctly. "No, I am the only passenger to-day."

"Ah!" said the good man, with a sigh of disappointment. "Well, sir, as pastor of the M. E. Church, I welcome you to our village. Do you remain long?"

"That depends," answered the other, "on how we get along together. I believe you and I are to travel in double harness for a time. Is it not so?"

"You—you are not Mr. Hart, the evangelist, are you?" asked the minister, smoothing his benumbed

right hand, left so from the recent handshake, and coaxing the look of welcome up from his soul.

"Yes, I'm Hart, all right enough," answered the other, laughing. "Trouble is, I don't look the part. Now, if you'll just wait until I get my satchel, we'll go over to the nice little home I know you must have in this beautiful place, and I will allow you to give me some refreshments. Some tea, you know. Ah, how I love a good, strong cup of tea!"

"Certainly—certainly! Please pardon my stupidity. You see, I had pictured you different from what you are. I—ahem!—did not recognize you."

The evangelist again glanced at the smiling faces before him, and nodded right and left.

"Well, I'm glad to see you all, friends," he said. "We'll get to know one another pretty well during the next couple of weeks, I believe."

"You have a trunk, I presume?" asked Mr. Stover.

"Trunk? Well, no, I never carry one. All my wardrobe consists of is a few handkerchiefs, night-robes, and so on. My guns and ammunition I carry here." He tapped his hip pocket, whence the worn leathern edges of a little book protruded. "That is all I carry outwardly. I have quite a lot of excess baggage stowed inside."

He smiled upon the people again. They returned it. Strange Hart, evangelist, was all right.

"Come to church and bring the babies. Don't forget the babies. I can talk all the better to their music. Nature's music for me every time, if I can get it. All right, my good man. Now we'll go and get that tea."

"Nan," said Mollie, after the minister and the evangelist had passed. "Nan, do you think—"

But Nan was looking out across the sunlit street with unseeing eyes.

"Nan."

The girl turned.

"Don't talk to me now, love," she said slowly, wistfully. There was a soft flush on her cheek.

Mollie drew the fair head down upon her bosom, and smoothed the defiant curls tenderly.

"Let us go and talk with Dorothy," she suggested.

CHAPTER XXII.

GOOD NEWS.

"You are getting taller than I, Gaff; you are growing so fast!" said Dorothy, putting her arm about the boy's shoulder, and with her other hand drawing his head over against her own. "Why, Gaff, you are nearly half a head taller!"

"I guess I be growin' pretty fast," agreed Gaff, "but don't you think I'm beatin' you, Dorrie, 'cause I ain't."

"You wouldn't if you could help it, boy," she answered, "but it's one of the things you can't help, you see."

"Dorrie, do you know that you're beautiful?" said the boy. "Your hair's just th' color of adder-tongues in th' springtime."

She laughed.

"You're always telling me that, Gaffy. Are adder-tongues pretty?"

"Jest th' color o' gold, Dorrie, only softer like. Seems like you kin look inter 'em, an' see gold behind th' gold."

The girl nodded.

"I think I understand," she said. "I think I would know all of the flowers if—if sight should come to me, Gaffy. I think I could go to the rose and say, 'Sweet flower, I know you, for, although blind, I have seen you very often.'"

"An' you'd know th' honeysuckle, an' th' white an' red lilies, an' th' wood violets, an' all, Dorrie—course you would. I believe they'd know you, too."

"Gaffy," asked the girl, softly; "tell me, Gaffy, would you be glad—very, very glad—if I could see?"

"You don't know how glad," he answered.

"Oh, only think, Gaffy, I could see *you* then. I have formed a picture of you in my mind, you know. I think you must have a beautiful face, Gaffy."

The boy's head sank on his breast.

"Why?" he asked, wisely.

"Because you are so good and unselfish. Because you are kind to dumb things. More, because you have been so good and kind to one little blind thing, Gaffy. That is why my mind's picture is beautiful."

Gaff was silent. He could not find words to speak his thoughts. At last he looked up. The girl's blue eyes were fixed upon him as though they really saw him and noted his red hair and freckled, homely face.

"Dorrie," he said, "little Dorrie, there is only one thing in th' wide world I wouldn' have you see, if sight should come t' you. Thet's myself."

"Oh, Gaffy!"

"It's only because I'm so ugly lookin', Dorrie. I am ugly, fer sure. My face is awful humbly. I'm freckled, too. My hair—"

"Your hair, I know, is beautiful," she said. "I can feel it. It is fine and silky, Gaffy, and it curls, too."

"Dorrie, I would like you t' think thet," said the boy, "only you mustn'. *It's—red.*"

Gaff held his breath. The confession cost him more than she could ever know.

"Then it must be beautiful," she said, softly.

"Please don't try and destroy my little pictures, Gaffy. They're all I have, you understand."

"Dear gal, dear little Dorrie," he whispered, "do you think I'd spoil one o' your pictures?" His sunburned hand wiped his eyes.

"I'm jest what you think I am, Dorrie. I was jest a-foolin'. I—I'm jest what you think I am, no matter what thet is."

"Dear boy," she said. "Dear old Gaff."

"I dunno as it 'ud make very much difference, arter all," said the boy, thoughtfully. "Like as not your pictures will be allers your pictures, Dorrie. You say thet you 'ud know th' flowers if you saw 'em. Well, wouldn't it be 'cause you had learned th' scent an' th' sof'ness of th' lily thet you 'ud know it was a lily?"

"Yes, Gaff."

"Well, it'd be in' same with people, maybe. Th' lily's color wouldn't make any difference t' you, Dorrie, 'cause you have learned t' know it in a different way. Now you know me by my voice, my size, th' tech o' my rough hands, an' th' tunes I whistle, an' all thet. Well, would you care even a little bit, I wonder, if sight should come t' you an' you should see thet my face *was* humbly an' freckled, thet my hands *was* rough, an'—an' my hair red."

The corners of the boy's mouth twitched as he leaned toward the blind girl for her answer.

Bruno trotted up, and stretching himself at the feet of his mistress, looked from one face to the other with big, wondering eyes.

"Gaffy," spoke the girl, softly. "nothing can ever change my little pictures. As I know you now I shall always know you."

Bruno, feeling something wet and warm touch his nose, looked at Gaff and whined gently. Understanding, the girl reached for the boy's hand.

"You mustn't take it that way, Gaffy," she said. "I want you to feel glad to-day. Do you know why?"

"Tell me, Dorrie?"

"Well, a doctor—he's an eye specialist from New York—was here this morning—"

She broke off, and covered her face with her hands.

"Dorrie! Dorrie!" cried the boy. "Did he say—did he say—?"

"He said that sight might yet be mine. When I am a year older he is going to operate on my eyes, and that—"

Bruno, just dropping into a doze, awoke with a start to find two arms twined about his neck, and a voice like a wild Indian's shouting in his ear:

"Wake up, you ole beggar. Bruno, Bruno, she's goin' t' see! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Bruno gave a yelp of pleasure, and the two, boy and dog, rolled over and over together on the grass.

By-and-bye both sprawled on the green, utterly exhausted, but happy. Dorothy, sitting on the garden bench, laughed happily.

"Oh, you two great, big ninnies!" she said.

But Gaff's spirits were not yet satisfied. He, having gained his wind, proceeded to walk about the lawn on his hands, after which exercise he kicked his hat all the way down the lawn and over the hedge fence into the street. Bruno got to it first and bolted down the street with it. Gaff in his wake yelling like a wild Apache.

Some of the people the two got out of the way,

wisely. Others yelled, "Oh, Gaff, what's up?" To which questions Gaff gave but one answer: "Whoop-la! She's goin' t' see!" and passed on with a yell like a fire-engine's whistle.

Turning a corner abruptly, Bruno ran full-tilt into a tall, dark-faced man who carried a shabby valise in one dirty hand. The stranger's feet went up into the air, and he sat down hard on the gravel walk. Gaff, coming right behind, tumbled over him with a rush. He was up again in a jiffy, and stopping only long enough to yell in the man's ear, "Wake up! She's goin' t' see!" was off again like a shot.

With an oath the man sat up and gazed at the boy's retreating form. Then, with another oath, he sprang to his feet.

"That's him! Red-head 1 and freckled! Yes, that's him. So here he has been all this time, eh? And I've been hunting him in Winnipeg. I'll make somebody smart fer this. Wait till I see that deaf old hotel-keeper, and that fellow that swapped me that balky horse. Just wait!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"PROTRACTED MEETING."

"I WOULD like all of the Christian people to gather near me, near the altar."

Strange Hart, the evangelist, looked across the little sea of faces as he gave the invitation.

The congregation was a large one. There were those present who as Christians were ready to enter into the fight with that fervor that marks the old-time Methodist warrior. On their faces the evangelist marked the already dawning expression of enmity toward the Evil One. He had seen the lust for battle with sin dawn in this way many times. It was encouraging. He stood before them all, tall and straight, his curling hair brushed back carelessly from his broad brow. His face was white, perhaps from the strain of a recent struggle, but his gray eyes burned with a fervency that was unmistakable. He noted in those faces before him curiosity, wonderment and defiance.

"Come, brothers and sisters," he said. "Come near to me, for I need your sympathy. Sing," he cried, "that beautiful old hymn, 'There Were Ninety and Nine.' Sing it as you come."

Deacon Ringgold was on his feet in a flash. The deacon always led the singing in Sunday School. As he made his way to the altar, he started the singing in a loud voice. It was taken up throughout the congregation, and the Christian people began to move for-

ward. Seated in the shadow, the evangelist was praying softly.

Finally he stood up. A strange silence settled upon the congregation, a silence he did not attempt to break for a moment.

At last he spoke.

" If there are any more Christian people present who will join us at the altar, we invite them to do so while I have a few words with you all. To those of you who are out of the fold, I say that we intend to save you if we can.

" I understand sin about as well as any sinner in this house. I used to be a pretty big sinner myself. I was well brought up and received a liberal education from my parents. One night I took my first drink of whiskey, and realized that I had awakened a demon that could never be satisfied. I drank secretly for a time. At last, realizing that I could no longer control my appetite, too craven to stay and watch the gradual breaking of loving hearts, I slunk away from home. It was as beautiful a home as ever wayward boy had, an old-fashioned cottage in a wooded nook 'way down in a sunny, southern clime, where Nature is at her grandest. Well, I left it all, left the peace of it and, God forgive me, the loves of it, for a phantom. The old home is there still, but the loves of it—oh, they are gone, gone!"

He passed his hand across his pale face. The audience waited silently for more.

" For five years I was a wanderer. During that time there is scarcely a sin on the devil's menu-card that I did not participate in. I did almost everything for a livelihood but honorable work. Understand me,

I need never have stooped to such things. My dear father would have given me all the money I required, even if I had failed to make a livelihood at my profession, for I was qualified. I have taught a dancing school. I have tended bar in low dives. I have been a prize-fighter, and later a thug, whose part it was to quell disturbances in low saloons.

"Well, I saw life all right enough, a side of life that does not tend to make one better, but drags one down to the end of everything and hopelessness. I did not feel fit to return to those whom I had left behind me. The devil had kept telling me that they had ceased to wonder where I was. And so I kept on the downward path until a something, I knew not what then, but have since learned was God's hand, stayed me—and—and—I turned.

"So low had I fallen that I was to participate in a crime so heinous that I shudder even now to recall it. On the night it was to take place, or be 'pulled off,' as the expression of that portion of the rough element with whom I mixed called it, I was ready. I met my colleagues—three of them there were—in a saloon, the common place of meeting. We were discussing our final plans—or rather, they were—and I was standing by silent, when all at once a woman's voice in the building started to sing. As I listened I seemed to be drawn back, back along the crooked path I had made to an old cottage in a valley beneath the trees, my southern home. I could have sworn it was my mother who sang. The voice was hers. The song was one I had often heard her sing, too, 'Darling, I Am Growing Old.' You know it—it is a beautiful old song, isn't it? Well, that song brought me back from the brink.

"I turned upon those brutes and told them I would have nothing to do with their plot. They pleaded, and finally threatened. I tried to get out without trouble, but they were afraid I would tell. They would have killed me; as it was, they almost did so. I cannot say what I did, because I do not know. I only know I fought as a soul in the bottomless pit might fight for water. I may have injured one or more of those men, but, friends, I was fighting for more than liberty.

"I gained the outside, and I was far from the spot when daylight dawned. I carried part of a heavy oaken chair in my hand.

"I left the great city and started across the country on foot. Oh, the breath of the blossom-filled air! It seemed like the sweet caress of childhood. The green of the wide fields and the whisper of the leaves on the trees, it was all so sweet to me. Five years of sin lay behind me, and still, it seemed, within me. It was within me, it was part of me. After a time I came to a spot that reminded me very much of home. There was no cottage there, but there was the valley and the trees. A brook ran down the valley. It was such another as I had played beside many and many a time as a child.

"Well, friends, I felt that this spot was a good one for me to ask God's forgiveness in, and I did it. I didn't have any help; I didn't need any. There was no minister or evangelist there, save the wind and the leaves, the birds and the flowers; and they, my people, are God's best ministers, after all. I promised God that I would try and lead souls to Him, if He would forgive me all that I had done toward leading souls away from Him.

"That's why I'm here, and I warn those of you

who have a pet sin which you cherish, that you'd better stay at home with it if you wish to keep it, for sin is going to receive a mighty shaking up before the end of this week.

"I went back home. Part of it only was remaining. Father and mother were both sleeping close beside the cottage door. A little sister who was so much to me in dead, gray days slept between them. So, with my cross and my Bible, I turned and faced the world again, a world in which I have won many victories, not through any power of mine but through a Higher Power, of whom I am but an agent.

"Now, I have told you the story of my life, so you may understand the better what I have been and what I am. The choir is going to sing now, and we are all going to take part in it. Then I will speak to you about yourselves."

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN ADVENTURE AND A RESCUE

"If you'll only come an' sit fer a while, Miss, you'll have company home. Mr. Simson, th' teacher, 'll be along soon; he's comin' over t' teach Buz drawin'. Buz is takin' drawin' lessons one night a week," explained Mrs. Fields, proudly.

"Why, how nice? And does Mr. Simson come all the way down here to teach him drawing?" asked Mollie Gray.

"Indeed he does, an' I say it's too much fer him, although I'm awful pleased he takes sech an interest in our Buz. But, miss, thet teacher is jes' 'bout th' best an' finest young man thet has ever been in these parts. Two years ago this summer when Ed. Goosecall was down with fever an' ager there wasn't a man t' be got fer love er money t' take care of th' crops, who d'you s'pose did his work fer him? Why, th' teacher did. He jest give up goin' away t' some place er other fer his holidays an' harvested Ed's crops fer him. An' when Mr. Goosecall wanted ter pay him fer his work, he simply made fun of him like, an' wouldn't take a cent."

Mollie lifted the great bunch of asters she held to her face.

"That was very good of him, I am sure, Mrs. Fields," she said, gently.

"Oh, he's an awful good young man, Miss Gray.

I'd like t' tell you more good things about him, but unless you'll come in an' sit, I won't keep you, fer it's nearly dark now, an' you've got quite a little piece t' walk t' th' village an' it's a lonesome road, too."

"Yes, I must be going. Thank you so much for the flowers, Mrs. Fields. I am sure Dorothy will be delighted with them. She has been longing for asters so much that I determined to give her a surprise. Gaff Linkum told me of the beauties you had down here. He was coming himself, but I wouldn't let him."

She laughed happily, and turned toward the gate.

"The path along the wood *does* look lonesome," she said. "I should have gone earlier. However, I have nothing to fear, I guess. Oh, listen to that whip-poorwill. Is that not a mournful cry?"

"Maybe you had best wait fer company, if you feel timid like," suggested the elder woman. "My Buz ort t' be home soon, an' he'll see you company t' th' village, Miss Gray."

"Oh, thanks. I'm not the least bit timid," laughed the girl. "Good-bye, Mrs. Fields. I won't forget to come back when the chestnuts are ready to drop. First hard frost, I think you said?"

"First hard frost, yes. Now be sure an' come," called the other.

It was almost dark when Mollie stepped out briskly toward the village. On the one side of her path lay partly broken fields, stumps arising from their faces, which in the half light took on the shape of crouching human forms. On the other side was the great bush, and away in its depths plaintive night-birds called and mournful owls hooted dismally.

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It is small wonder that Mollie, to whom such desolation was a new, strange thing, felt nervous and quickened her pace to almost a run. Almost she was on the point, once or twice, of turning back and waiting for company home, as Mrs. Fields had suggested.

"But," she thought, "such a thing would be foolish. There is nothing in this lonely spot to hurt me, and I will soon be home."

Imagine, then, her horror when suddenly, directly in her path, from behind a bunch of golden-rod, arose the figure of a man. In his hand he carried a short club and on his smoke-stained face was a wicked leer. There was still light enough left for Mollie to see all this, and she gave a horrified gasp and fell back.

"I'll trouble you fer thet watch an' chain, Miss, an' thet gold trinket aroun' yer neck," commanded the man.

She loosed them, and threw them at his feet.

"Now, please let me pass," she said, a great and nameless dread at her heart.

"Them rings. I'll take them, too, my purty," he growled.

She pulled them off and threw them also on the ground.

"See here," he cried, with an oath, "is thet any way t' hand a gent anythin'? Pick 'em up an' hand 'em t' me right, an' beg my parding fer flingin' of 'em at me. Do you hear?" he cried, striding forward to where she stood, gazing at him with terror-frozen eyes. "Pick 'em up, er it won't be good fer you."

She gave a little gasp as she saw his dirty hand reach toward her, and a feeling that she was going to swoon swept from heart to brain. Then something

swift and sudden swept between her and her danger, so that a new hope strengthened her. Then a full moon swam above the trees and she saw two men struggling. She heard the sound of blows and gave a little gasp. She saw the men break away, and the big one crouch, growling, waiting for a chance to spring. Compared with her rescuer, crouching also, he seemed a giant. As she watched them, fascinated, the huge man leapt, and the other stepped aside. She heard another crunching blow, and saw the big man topple backward and lay still.

Then her rescuer came forward.

"Come," he said. "I have your jewellery, and it is best that we do not tarry here. This man is one of a bad gang who are in hiding somewhere in this vicinity."

"Mr. Simson!" gasped Mollie, in surprise. "Is it really you?"

He smiled.

"You are very white and trembling," he said. "Please let me help you."

They passed on in silence, the girl leaning weakly on his arm. When she spoke again, they were on the road.

"Mr. Simson," she said, earnestly, "I cannot thank you for what you have done. But you will understand how I feel. I will never forget."

"I am glad I was able to help you," he said, simply.

He noted that the hands holding the asters were trembling.

"I hope your fright will have no evil effects," he added, as he opened the gate for her.

"Do you know, Mr. Simson," she said, a catch in

her voice, "scared as I was to-night, I wanted so to cheer you when you—when you knocked that big man down. You seemed so little and slender, and—and—I cannot understand."

"Science *versus* brute strength," he explained, jokingly. "Why *didn't* you cheer, then? It would have been such a help to me."

"Good-night," she said, softly.

"Good-night," he echoed, and turned away.

Once before, when the moonbeams made a silvery carpet along this path, he had walked, and before his vision had floated a face, a fair face crowned with tangled golden curls. To-night he saw it again, but dimmer, and beside it was another—a dark, animated face, with raven tresses.

"So unlike, and still so like," he thought. "Where, then, rests the similarity?"

At length he answered the question.

"It is in the soul," he said, and passed on, satisfied.

CHAPTER XXV.

OLD-TIME RELIGION.

It was the second week of the revival. Evangelist Hart's good work had been and was still being crowned with success. Night after night the little church had been packed to the doors. Night after night new converts were being added to the already long list. There had been some who had at first scoffed at the idea of a revival. A few of these even now sat in the front row happy in the faith that was now theirs. Among them was John McDonell. McDonell had been a bad man in every sense. He had been profane, he had been a drunkard, he had beaten his wife. He had contracted debts he could not pay, and had taken pleasure in the fact that he was cheating somebody. But a wondrous change had taken place in the man. He now sat with a little, red-covered hymn-book in his hand, as close to the evangelist as he could get, and drank in every word that was spoken. He had taken a stand for Christianity on the first night of the revival.

Benjamin Sward also sat in the first row, as did Mr. Shipley. The last-named, however, was not a new convert. He had been a "deciple," as he termed it, for many years. On his knee he held a pad of paper, and behind his ear a green lead-pencil. Mr. Shipley was the Talbotville correspondent for the Bridgetown

Flaindealer. He jotted down the points of the evangelist's remarks. These he would enlarge upon and have published in the paper. He also passed about the hymn-books, and saw that the lights were extinguished after service.

Evangelist Strange Hart had indeed stirred the souls of the people to great things. His words were simple, his appeal direct. One by one had the stray lambs come haltingly into the fold, lambs and sheep alike; it was a great revival.

Years ago our worthy forefathers worshipped with the same spirit that possessed them when they tackled the forest wilderness with their axes. Times were strenuous in those days, and prayers were hurled forth with a force that carried conviction. Psalms were sung with a fervency that bespoke victory in those fighting days of a quarter of a century or more ago. Comfort was not a consideration. Christians prayed from their knees, even if it were a little crowded and uncomfortable. They sang and prayed from the heart, and put some soul into the worship. True, these were the days of old, before people had become enlightened. If they were crude, these dear, old-time Christians, those of us who breathe a short, well-formed prayer between glances at our surroundings from the back of a cushioned pew can be generous and overlook their mistakes. Christianity is the same to-day as then. If any difference exists, it is in the mode of practice.

Evangelist Strange Hart believed in inciting this spirit of zealousness among the people. In those days they needed waking up, and they got what they needed.

To-night, in the calm between the fight and the

songs of victory, Deacon Dustband was passing the collection-box around among the congregation. In the shadow of the altar Strange Hart sat, his head resting on his hand. His face was wan. He had worked hard toward accomplishing the ends he had attained. In the choir, on his right, sat Nan Malcolm. She looked straight before her, as she had done from the first night of the revival, evincing not the slightest interest in what was being said or done. She sang each night a solo, in sweet contralto voice, that went straight to the hearts of her hearers, but further than that she took not the slightest interest.

The evangelist was watching her from eyes shaded by his hand. Her fair, sweet face and golden hair seemed very beautiful to him. But the deep blue eyes looking straight before held a look he could not understand, had never understood. No more could those who had known her for long as a happy-hearted Irish girl, for Nan had changed.

The man wondered why those eyes haunted him when, during his long day-walks, he prepared his talk for the night; haunted him after the service was over, when through the star-light he walked, as was his wont, alone to the parsonage. Even in the night he had seen them, dreamy eyes of heaven's own blue, with a shadow of pain in them, and behind it, in their inmost depths, a world of feeling, gazing, gazing, never at him, but always straight beyond him, even as they were gazing now.

He found himself leaning over the railing and looking into them.

"I would like you to sing, Miss Malcolm," he said. "Will you?"

"If you wish it," she answered. For a second their eyes met, then she looked quickly away.

The perfume of violets came to him and clung to him as through the song he sat with bowed head, thinking, remembering, longing.

He awoke guiltily from his brief reverie. The song was finished. The good people were telling their "experiences."

John McDonell, the Lowland Scotchman, was on his feet.

It was a struggle for this man to give testimony. Morose and silent as he had ever been, to speak of what was so new for him before a gathering who, for the most part, had known him for what he was, was a sore trial.

For an instant he had stood unable to say a word, gazing from under his shaggy brows at the evangelist. His pitted face was damp with perspiration the ordeal had brought.

"Speak, brother, even a word," urged Hart.

"I want you Chreestian freends t' pray for me. I ha' been a lang time awa' frae my reeght place. I ha' been sic a seener that I'm sair afeered I canna hald oot wi'oot vour heelp."

He mopped his streaming brow and made as though to sit down, whereupon Benjamin Sward arose and cleared his throat.

But the evange't held up his hand, warningly. McDonald had not finished.

"I lost a leetle lass an' twa laddies not lang sin, ye a' ken. Th' throat disease tuck 'em awa' frae us. I've been a worser mon sin then, nae doot. I meesed 'em. oh, how I meesed 'em. I couldna bear t' think I

wouldna eefer see th' lasses, er hear leetle Archie's voice na mair, whatefer. So eef ye wouldna do eet for bad Jack McDonald, on account of heem cheatin' ye in th' past, Chreestian freends, I asket ye do eet for th' laddie an' th' lasses' sakes. Sumthin' teels me th' bairns wouldna be happy ef I mees'd gangin' t' where they are noo."

He sat down, tears streaming down his face.

The evangelist attempted to speak, and failed. He nodded to Sward to proceed. But Brother Sward did not feel like speaking. He resumed his seat amid a great hush.

Then a child voice away down near the door floated out in song:

"Loved ones dwell in that city;
 You've a place beneath the sod;
 When your heart felt nigh like breaking
 You promised to serve your God.
 Say, will you, oh, will you,
 Say, will you meet me there?"

* * * * *

"Benjamin," said Mr. Shipley, as they walked home together after the service. "Benjamin, I hope and trust poor McDonell will hold out to the end."

"Poor Jack! He loved them leetle kids a lot, he did," sighed Sward.

"I trust he may henceforth lead a Christian life, Benjamin. I trust he may henceforth walk uprightly. He may yet make a good man. He should now begin by striving to pay what honest debts he has contracted—ahem!—McDonell still owes me for that light waggon, Benjamin."

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNDER THE MAPLE.

"But you will be coming back again before you go, Mr. Hart?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Malcolm, but I fear not. You see, my work here is finished for the present, and I must away to other fields."

"Well, it's a noble work you have done here, sir, and we are very sorry that you must leave us. Now, I knew I would get flour on your black coat with my handshaking. Just a minute, sir, and I'll brush it away. There you are, now!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Malcolm. Do you know, it's a long time since I had anyone brush my clothes for me in this way. Mother used to do it years ago."

He turned and looked out of the window across the lawn, to where a fair-haired girl was standing beneath a great maple. As he watched her, these words ran through his mind:

"I left you weeping where the lilacs bent,
A wealth of heliotrope above pure gold.
I live that time again; the lilac's scent
Comes from a withered blossom that I hold.
I left you weeping; had I known the worth
Of anguish then as years have taught it me,
Would lilacs that recall a memory
Be of God's blossoms sweetest here on earth?"

When he turned again, Mrs. Malcolm was wiping her eyes.

"I don't suppose a boy ever finds anybody in this wide world," she said, "just like his mother."

"No, no one. A boy's mother is really a part of the boy himself, I think. She nurses him, holds him, guides him and counsels him from the time he is given into her life. It is because she is, and ever was, part of the boy, that he does not realize what he has lost until after she is taken from him. I do not think this, Mrs. Malcolm—I know it to be so."

"Poor lad!"

"The love of a mother is the strongest, the purest love, I think, ever fashioned in heaven. It remains so always. Nothing can change its purity or strength. Only God and the motherless know this. Mrs. Malcolm, if I might have the greatest desire of my heart gratified to-day, do you know what I would ask for?"

"I think I do. You would have her with you again."

"Ah, yes; so that I might tell her in words what she was to me, and what her cherished memory is to me now."

"It may be she knows it all, now."

"If she does, then God indeed has been kind. Do you know that I have been so hungry for a mother's caress that I could have cried, strong man that I was—so hungry for it, so hungry for it was I."

"Ah, nothing that you will find in all this world will ever take its place, Mr. Hart."

"Nothing in the whole world can ever take its place, nothing."

"Would it pain you to tell me about her, about the mother?" asked the sympathetic woman.

"I will tell you about her," he answered. "She was a little woman, with a face on which a sweet peace always rested. We used to take long walks together, she and I, when I was a boy." He drew his fingers through his thick hair. His square jaw was set, his lips were twitching. "When I was a boy," he repeated, as though to himself, "years ago, before the curse of drink drove me from her."

"And you had long walks together, Mr. Hart?"

"Mrs. Malcolm," he said, "I am going to ask a favor of you. I do not often ask favors, but I feel you will be glad to grant this one."

He ceased speaking, abruptly, and looked away.

"You see," he said, after a time, "you are a mother, and I—I am a lad who has lost a mother. She used to call me Stray. Will you call me by that name?"

"Stray," said the woman, softly. "Stray."

He smiled brightly.

"Thank you," he said, simply. "It is a long time since I heard anyone say that name."

"I would like to tell you of some of the things we used to talk about," he continued, "but they were perhaps much the same as mothers and sons always talk about. We used to plan my future together. Those were happy moments in mother's life—happy moments in mine."

"Oh, you must have missed her so much."

"Missed her! I have craved for her. I miss her every day, every night. I dream about her often, and awake with tears upon my cheeks. You know," he said, sadly, "I killed her."

"No, no, you must not say that!" cried the tender-hearted woman, as she wiped her eyes.

"It is true. I killed her. She—she never knew, thank God, what it was drove me from her. At least I saved her from that. She sleeps away off there in the old grove where we two sat together many times. She died calling for me. There, there," he said, coming over and taking the weeping woman's hand in his. "I am sorry I have grieved you with my story. Oh! I am so homesick to-day."

"I—I know you will be with her and happy again some day," sobbed the woman. "Oh, what would Nannie do without her mammie, I wonder?"

"God grant she may not know the feeling of the motherless for many long days!" said Strange Hart, gently.

"I always thought your face mirrored some great grief," said the woman, looking up through her tears. "Thank you for confiding that grief to me."

"It is good of you to let me," he responded, quickly.

Mrs. Malcolm turned to the window. There she stood for some moments. A golden-haired girl was gathering a great pile of maple leaves. Resting upon her, the woman's eyes grew dim again. "Poor boy!" she whispered. Then, turning slowly, she held out her hands to the evangelist.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Malcolm!" he said, taking them. Then, half hesitatingly, he bent and tenderly, reverently, touched the silvery hair of the woman with his lips.

CHAPTER XXVII

"GOOD-BYE, LITTLE GIRL."

"It makes me very miserable to give pain to those I like so much, Mr. Hart, and I do like you. Everybody likes you."

Nan's eyes met the evangelist's with an effort. But the gaze was simple, truthful.

Looking at her, the big man felt a great longing to take her slender form in his arms and crush her to him.

But the feeling passed swiftly. In its track as swiftly swept the waves of helplessness, that flood the souls of *re* men who have hoped and staked and—lost.

But shadows cannot linger long before blue skies and sunshine.

"Nan," he said, "there is light enough in your dear eyes to light a starved soul from the Now to the Eternity. I am going to-morrow, and I wish you to know that always the memory of you—"

He hesitated and looked down. The girl laid a little hand upon his arm. He thrilled at the touch.

"The memory of me?"

O helpless stupidity of man! Why, why did he not look into those eyes again then, and find all the joy he was starving for? But his gaze was on the ground.

"That memory will be my beacon-light to cheer and

guide me, Nan. It is more to me now and will be more to me while life lasts than all else beside."

She sighed, and he glanced up quickly.

"Why can't you love me, Nan?" he asked, taking the hand from his arm and holding it.

A flush crept over the girl's face.

"Shall I tell you why?" she asked.

"Please do."

She withdrew her hand from his clasp, and put it behind her back.

"You should not take liberties," she said, coldly.

He winced.

"You ask me why I cannot—"

"Yes."

"Because you tried to compel me to love you—That is why."

"Tried to compel you," he repeated, dazed.
"compel you—"

The flush had fled from her face, leaving it white. He noted her lips tremble, and knew that what he told him cost her great effort. Once more the flood of a consuming desire swept across his soul. She appealed to him so, this fragile girl. He knew, without knowing why he knew, that she craved for such sympathy as he could give.

"Nan," he whispered, holding out his arms.

For a moment her wide blue eyes looked into his, a moment in which all her heart's story was telegraphed to his. She swayed a little toward him, then her hands caught at the tree, weakly.

When she spoke there was a dry sob in her voice.

"Will you please go?" she asked. "Will you go now, now, before I lose the respect I bear toward you?"

"And I do respect you, I do like you, in spite of—everything."

"Nan," he answered, "will you send me from you after what I have just learned."

"What have you learned?"

She glanced at him, a look before whose pitiful helplessness he was dumb.

After a time he spoke.

"Forget what I have just said, Nan. I have learned nothing."

She gave him a little, wan smile of thanks. There was enough of the old light in it to flash before his soul the panorama of a brief past, when swiftly his heart had passed from his keeping to that of a girl with golden hair who had always looked past him and beyond him, even as she was doing now.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hands.

He took them, pressing them tenderly and passionately.

"Good-bye, little girl," he said, gently, and turned away.

Half an hour later Mrs. Malcolm came to where Nan sat with piles and piles of maple leaves at her feet.

"Nan," said her mother, reproachfully, "what have you been doing? Why, there are bushels of leaves in that pile."

"Oh, mammie!" cried the girl, springing to her feet and gathering the wide leaves up in a great armful, "it's to be my love bouquet to little Dorothy—she loves them so."

She laughed excitedly and sat down again, weakly, beside her mother on the bench.

"There, dear, you are not yourself. Mr. Hart—"

"Dorothy loves maple leaves so much, mammie," cried Nan, interrupting, "and so I gathered 'em and gathered 'em until—"

A little catch came into her voice and again she laughed hysterically.

"Yes, yes, darling, but you love maple leaves yourself, and there are enough here for you both."

"I—I don't care, mammie!" There was a sob in the voice now. "I will always hate them after to-day. I don't want to ever see one again. I don't want to feel their touch. I—I just hate maple leaves, mammie, so there!" and she threw the great bunch from her.

The next moment she was gathered close into a mother's arms and was crying her heart out on a mother's bosom.

And so for an hour's time, beneath a wide maple upon which the crimson-yellow of early autumn was just settling, a woman held a girl close in her protecting embrace. One hand smoothed tenderly the golden hair that a piercing sunbeam softly kissed and awoke to richer beauty. Out upon the lawn the sunlight was swiftly bleaching the scattered maple leaves, lying hated and forgotten there.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THIEVES IN THE NIGHT.

THERE was a great commotion in the village of Talbotville. Thieves had been abroad in the night, and had broken into the main stores and shops of the town. It had been a successful expedition for them, as the druggist, the baker, the grocers and the hardware merchant could avow. The only man in business who did not suffer loss to any great extent was Bill Jones, the blacksmith. All he had lost was a few files and a crowbar. So, in the midst of the crowd that had assembled on the corners to discuss the affair, he could afford to stand with his huge arms folded and smoke his short pipe dreamily, the while he listened to the various solutions offered by his townspeople as to who had committed the robberies, and the causes pertaining thereto.

"Whoever they are, they know their business," cried Mr. Malcolm, bringing his fist down in his palm with a resounding whack. "I say, Bill, what did you lose?"

"About sixty dollars cash and I should judge about the same in goods," answered Mr. Dustband. "The rascals must be cool ones."

"Gracious!" exclaimed the blacksmith, taking his pipe from his mouth and rubbing its warm bowl along his hairy arm.

"They got about a hundred cash from Jacey, I

heern," said Dick Dashmore, "an' they took all his guns an' ammunition an' a lot o' hardware besides."

"Gee Christopher!" exulted the blacksmith.

Just here Ed. Goosecall joined the group. Something like a gleam of amusement was struggling across his worried face.

"I say, men, poor Simon Diggs is wild, though," he cried. "Seems th' thieves visited his cellar. They left th' taps runnin', an' the old man is goin' about investigatin' in a pair o' waders."

Nobody seemed to appreciate the joke. Most of the men were thinking of their losses and planning vengeance. Nobody spoke, except the big blacksmith. After a minute's reflection, he said:

"Gracious! You don't say, Ed!"

"Cheer up, Bill. You look as though you had lost every plunker in th' world," cried Goosecall, coming over and slapping Dustband's broad shoulder sympathetically.

"It's not so much my losses that are bothering me, Ed," replied Dustband, sadly. "They poisoned little Dorothy's dog."

Goosecall exploded an oath and doubled up his big fists.

"We've gotter catch 'em now, boys," he said, between his teeth. "We've gotter catch 'em, an' we'll—we'll—"

"He is not dead yet," said Dustband, "but I guess nothing can save him."

"Great Scott!" said the blacksmith. "Great Jupiter! Have you told the gal?"

Dustband turned his great eyes, in which a smoul-

dering fire shone, upon the speaker. The corners of his mouth twitched as he answered:

"You fool, no."

"Of course not," said the blacksmith, blinking.

"No, of course you haven't."

"She thort a lot o' thet dog, she did, boys," said Goosecal.. 'I move we make it a p'int t' catch these robbers. We'll arrest 'em fer steal.n' an' hang 'em fer poisonin' Bruno. I mean thet. What d'ye say?"

"I'm goin' t' have a look at Bruno," cried Dashmore. "I know sumthin' 'bout sech things. I've had dogs poisoned, an' saved 'em."

"Dick," cried Dustband, "if you pull him out of this, if you can save Bruno, you may name what you want. If it takes all I own, you can have it."

"Guess you kin pay all I'll ask, all right," replied Dick, moving away.

"He's in the shed behind the store, Dick. I couldn't bear to see him gasping there, so I left the poor fellow in charge of Buz and Gaff."

"Well, Gaff orter know what t' do in a case of pisonin'," said Dick, turning toward the shed.

"If anyone'll pull th' dog through, thet un's Dick," spoke Mr. Fields, who had just come up and had heard enough to put him in possession of the facts. "He saved a hoss o' mine wunst, fine leetle blood feller I got in a deal at Clearview. Vet. from Bridgetown had give him up. Along comes Dick.

"What's wrong?"

"Hoss dyin'."

"What'smatter'ith't?"

"Don' know. Can't fin' out."

"Lemme see him."

"An', by dang, do you know, Dick pulled that hoss right through, too."

"He knows more'n people give him credit fer," put in Goosecall.

"He says he believes he knows who one of the robbers is," said Dustband.

"One of 'em! Bet there's a dozen of 'em!" cried Fields.

"Well, we'll get the bell-sheep an' he'll lead us t' th' flock. See?"

"What we want is a night-watchman," spoke Mr. Creation. He had joined the group a moment before and had listened to Mr. Fields' remarks about his blood horse with a withering smile on his face. That face was a little haggard this morning, and the man drew his long, white fingers through his flowing, dyed beard nervously. "The constable we have is no good. He was drunk last night. He will lose his position through his negligence to duty, gentlemen."

"Dear me!" sighed the blacksmith.

"Well, boys, maybe it's jest as well fer Conley that he *was* drunk," said Goosecall. "What could he have did t' stop this thing if he'd been sober, anyways?"

"Done? Done his duty," answered Mr. Creation.

"An' got his head stave in, like as not."

"He is paid for taking chances on getting his head stave in," said Mr. Creation, with a rising inflection on the "stave."

"Yep, six dollars a month, uniform an' club throwed in," grinned Fields. "Seems t' me mos' any head is wuth more'n six a month. What you say, Shipley?"

"Gentlemen," replied Mr. Shipley, "I might say, as

I am interested in this atrocious robbery but indirectly, it had been my intention not to venture my humble opinion as to the pros and cons of the affair. Being asked, however, as to what I think of the conduct of our local constable on this occasion, if my poor opinion be of any benefit to you, gentlemen, you are welcome to it."

"Are you all through?" asked Mr. Creation, smiling coldly.

"I had not as yet commenced, sir."

"Well, you take a lot of shunting around to get started. Why don't you say something when you talk, Shipley?"

"It is barely probable, sir, that I do say something when I talk. I do not hold myself responsible for the inability of certain persons to understand good English, sir."

"Oh, what conceit!" groaned Creation.

"Oh my!" sighed the blacksmith.

"Shipley's too much fer you, Jacey," laughed Goosecall. "Understands men jes' 'bout as well as he does fish, Jack does. He's a scholar."

Mr. Creation eyed Goosecall over his spectacles as though he pitied the man. The look meant volumes. Goosecall was to be pitied for his ignorance. Everybody who saw Creation's look of commiseration thought so. Everybody, Shipley excepted, looked pityingly at Goosecall.

"Some men are easier to understand than fish are." Mr. Creation smiled and stroked his beard.

"Unless it be a sucker like yourself," the other retorted, his fighting blood starting to tingle.

"Here, men, you must not get personal, you know,"

cautioned Dustband. "We have more to think about to-day than squabbles. Let us get down to work. The question before the house is, how are we going about it to catch the robbers?"

"I would very much like to be shown the scene of the robberies," said Mr. Shipley.

"Laws!" breathed the blacksmith, "he's a detective, too, is he?"

"He's everything that ever any man has been or ever will be—that is, in his mind he is," whispered Fields, who had approached the blacksmith with a view to soliciting a chew, "but what he really is is—"

Fields winked, and tapped his head significantly with his finger.

"Well, I declare!" said the smith, feeling for his tobacco. "Well, I do declare!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

GIPSIES.

It was a dark, still night, still and close. Not a breath of wind even stirred the tree-tops. In the open spot a fire of dry wood burned noiselessly. The flames threw a red light upon the faces of the men and women seated in the outer circle, away from the fire's heat. Swarthy, dirty faces they were, with the marks of dissipation and crime upon them. This was the gipsy camp, in Ross's woods.

Standing apart from the others, a man and a woman were speaking.

"You haven't said that you are glad to see me, Di?"

"What is the good of saying that I cannot mean?"

"Then you are not glad?"

"No."

"Do you wish I had stayed away?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"It is a matter of indifference to me," she answered.

A deeper red than the firelight lent them sprang to the man's cheeks.

"You have always hated me," he asserted, in a grieved, wheedling tone.

She paid no attention to his remark. She was looking out and away, as though her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Henry says you've been playing the haughty dame lately; says you've been acting queer. I guess you have missed me, after all."

The woman turned her big, black eyes full upon him. They noted every line in his brute face. They saw the conceited leer upon the thin cruel lips. Then she laughed. It was a laugh that bespoke more of amusement than defiance.

"Poor Henry!" she mocked. "Do you know, it would have been better for you had you stayed away," she added.

"See here, Di, you can't come that over me, you understand," he hissed, catching her rudely by the wrist.

She did not attempt to struggle. She simply kept her eyes riveted to his. He attempted to speak again, but the words died away in mere sputter. At last he staggered back, with an oath.

The woman leaned against a tree, and looked through the night again.

"Di," said the man, "what makes you act like this? What makes you look into a man like that? I can't stand those eyes!"

He came across to her, cringing.

"Is this any sort of way for a woman to treat a man after he has been trying his best to get her son for her?"

"After he has robbed her of her son, you mean." She spoke calmly, deliberately.

"What—what do you mean?" He looked about him furtively, and dropped his eyes.

"You are a coward," she said, "besides being a thief, a vagabond and a murderer. I'm sorry for you."

"Who told you these things?" he cried, his face going white.

"That's none of your business," she answered. "It's enough for you to know that I have learned them."

"Someone has lied to you, Di," he whined.

"No, someone has not lied to me. Do you know," she said, wearily, "I do not think it possible for a man to be lower than you are? Do you realize the extent of your wickedness?"

"I've always played square by you, Di."

"Yes, you have played about as squarely as your warped soul would permit of your playing, and"—she smiled a peculiar smile—"because you had to."

"Do you mean that I have been scared of you?"

"You *are* scared of me."

She looked at him again. He mopped the sweat off his forehead with a dirty hand.

"You knew that I would have killed you once. Even through all those long years spent with your people I was capable of taking my own part. I would kill you now just as quickly as I would have killed you then."

A smile parted her red lips. Her teeth shone white in the firelight.

"Oh, you are such a pitiful coward!" she said.

The man's head sank on his breast. He shivered.

"You are trying to pick me," he sputtered, feebly. "You don't know anything against me."

"I know that you murdered my husband and almost murdered me. As it was, you robbed me of my reason for nine years. It has returned to me lately—and I remember."

The man did not move or speak.

"You took my baby from me, and left it—" Her voice broke in a dry sob.

"Oh, why should I not kill you?" she cried, gliding towards him.

He fell back from her, his greasy face twitching and yellow-white from fright.

"No," she said, "you snake! Your time is not yet. Give me those papers."

"What papers?" he gasped, falling back.

"My husband's will and the bank-notes you stole from him. Quick, tell me where are those papers?"

"I haven't got them. I hid them, and when I returned to get them, they were gone."

She laughed scornfully.

"I want my papers, Captain Boyse, and you must give them to me," she said, calmly. "Do you think I would believe such a story?"

"I tell you," he cried, "those papers were stolen from where I hid them in an old, hollow stump. As true as I stand here I speak the truth. No matter how much I have lied to you in the past, you can believe me now. I haven't the papers."

Something, as the woman listened, told her he spoke the truth. Slowly the blood ebbed from her face, leaving it deathlike in its whiteness. At length the man spoke.

"How—how much do you remember?" he asked, in low tones.

"Enough to hang you, Captain Boyse, *alias* William Grenville, forger and escaped convict from Kingston Penitentiary, and murderer of my husband," she answered, quickly.

The coward cringed before her.

"Di," he pleaded, chokingly, "don't give me over to the law. I'll do anything you ask of me, only don't do that, Di. Oh, I couldn't stand imprisonment again. Those convicts with the hard eyes and the drawn faces—the cruel keepers with their lashes—the awful stillness when it's night, and the gray rats that glare and grin at you and snap at you when you close your eyes—oh, I would die a thousand deaths rather than go back. I—"

"You will not have to go back," she interrupted, coldly. "You forget you are a murderer. In Canada they hang murderers."

He glared at her like a whining, cornered wolf might glare at its tormentor.

"Di," he commenced once more, but she stopped him.

"Do not expect me to show mercy," she cried, "you who have killed my husband and robbed me of my baby and my wealth—everything I had in the world except my self-respect. "That," she added, lowering her voice, "you failed to take."

He muttered an oath and rubbed the shoulder wherein was imbedded a tiny leaden pellet.

"You thought my baby had been killed, as you had ordered. Now you would steal and hold him in hope of a reward. Well, you will never get him. I tell you this because I am not afraid of you or any of your cut-throat followers. I wanted to see you before leaving your band forever, because I thought you had the papers that meant so much for me. You say you have not, and for once I believe you speak the truth. I am going now."

"Where?" he cried, his eyes staring.

"To the village, where I shall lay informations against you all—and to my baby," she faltered.

She looked across through the night, and watching her the man saw a strange new light creep across her face and wipe out its shadow.

"Curse her!" he whispered. "She will do it if we let her." Then, noting that her gaze was still fixed on distance, he held up his right hand, palm outward.

Two of the watchful tools, seated by the fire, rose stealthily and vanished into the wood. The man, his teeth close clenched, his eyes wild with fear, waited.

The woman stood silent, looking away across a stretch of time to a place still misty in memory; a place, please God, she would soon know again.

Suddenly her hands were seized and held fast, and a bandage deftly slipped across her mouth. Then a voice she recognized as belonging to the man Henry asked:

"What now, Cap'n?"

"Tie her hands and gag her," answered the cringing coward.

He came forward and stood before the woman.

"Tie a cloth across her eyes. Be quick. I can't stand those eyes.

It was soon done. Then, turning to the men, he said:

"Her memory has returned. She remembers enough to hang every man of us. She knows everything. She'll have to go where—"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder significantly. Both his tools laughed; but one's mouth tightened.

"Not if Pete knows it, she won't," he muttered to himself.

Then, bending as though to re-arrange the bandage across the woman's eyes, he whispered in her ear:

"Don't worry. Ole Pete'll save yer."

"When will it be, Cap'n?" asked the man Henry, nodding toward the captive.

"We'll give her ten days to decide on whether she will marry me and love, honor and obey me ever after, or carry all she knows into the *hereafter*," answered the other. "Maybe by that time she will have come to her senses. But we won't give her any longer than ten days. We ought to be moving now. I hear the villagers suspect us of those robberies. We ought to be able to get the boy inside of a week. We have got to get out of here soon. The mate isn't healthy."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE AWAKENING OF MOLLIE.

THE school-teacher broke off a twig of the red-brown sumach and handed it to the girl.

"I beseech thee to accept my floral offering, fair lady," he said, bowing.

She took the cluster from his hand and held it before her face.

"You are laughing," he said, chidingly.

"No—only smiling," she replied. "Fair ladies always smile upon their knights at such times, I believe, Mr. Simson."

He looked at her gravely.

"Do you know," he said, "your eyes are almost of the same hue as the blossoms you hold?"

"That is a nice compliment," she replied. "I think the shade of the blossoms perfectly beautiful."

"Late blossoms are always a beautiful color," he said.

"Are they really more beautiful than the earlier ones, after all?" asked the girl. "Sometimes I think we deem them so because we shall miss them so soon."

She looked away across the valley to the woodland. The maples had donned their golden cloak, and a smoky halo rested above them.

"Sweet, misty Indian summer," she whispered.

He heard her, and, turning, looked into her eyes.

"You love Nature very much, don't you?" he asserted, rather than asked.

"Yes, very much," she answered.

She felt his earnest gaze and turned, laughing, to the path.

"We must be going now," she said.

He turned and held out his hand.

"Let me help you over the rough places, Miss Gray."

"You are very good to me, Mr. Simson. You have been very good to me since I have been here, haven't you?"

"Here in the grove, do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Since I have been in the village."

He looked at her gravely.

"I would give much to know when you are in jest and when you are in earnest," he said, smiling.

"Oh, I am really in earnest now," she responded.

"Everybody has been good to poor little Mollie since she has been here. Do you know," she added, looking away, "I shall hate to leave this place?"

"Then don't leave it," he advised.

"Ah, I must gang awa' to the big, smoky city soon," she asserted, "back to the high smokestacks and the money gods, and"—she turned and looked into his face—"I'm going to take the spirit of this place back with me. I'm going to take Nan."

He returned her gaze frankly.

"Are you?" he asked.

"Why, you don't seem at all concerned," cried the girl, reproachfully.

"Does—does Nan *want* to go?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, I haven't asked her yet," replied Mollie. "No doubt she will appreciate a change, however, and I promise to take the best of care of her. Oh, she is the sweetest girl I ever knew," she broke off, enthusiastically.

"We shall all miss you both very much."

"Do you think she will go, Mr. Simson?"

"Why not? All girls are anxious to see the big city, aren't they?"

"I don't think that Nan is like other girls," said Mollie.

The man was silent for a time. At length he said, softly:

"I know a girl who is her exact counterpart in—in greatness of character and sweetness of disposition."

"How short the days are growing!" cried his companion. "See, Mr. Simson, it is almost sunset."

"Will you miss our sunsets, and our quiet place of wood and valley?" he asked, wistfully.

"Oh, yes, yes," she answered. "You will never know how much."

He looked into the sweet, dark face and noted a light, strange to him, resting upon it. Meeting his gaze, her eyes fell.

"Will you come back again some time?" he asked, his pulse quickening. "And is it likely to be long from now?"

"It may be a long, long time from now," she answered.

"Can't you promise us that it will be—not a very, very long time from now?"

"I will promise you not to keep Nan so very, very long away from you," answered the girl, evasively.

"May I write to you?" he asked. "Remember, you once told me that you would look to me to give you all the news from here after you had gone."

"Won't you forget it, please?"

"No, I absolutely refuse," he said, doggedly.

"Then I will take revenge by passing censure on your letters. I will tell you that you can't write good letters, and that they aren't half newsy enough."

"Then I'll make them better and more newsy," he replied.

"This is the last souvenir," said the girl, regretfully holding up the sumach blossom. "I have quite a number to take back with me."

"There are the cones from the twin pines," said the man.

"And the lucky stones we found on the beach," she added.

"And the napkin you swiped at the picnic."

"And the letter Dick Dashmore wrote from Winnipeg."

"Oh, I say now, you haven't got that letter, have you?"

She laughed merrily.

"Mr. Diggs gave me the letter, Mr. Simson. By the way, Dick writes a very nice letter. His hand and spelling are better than one would think. Now, if *you* could only write letters as good as Dick can, I am sure I could not find fault with them."

"I will try and write better ones. Dick wrote that one in a hurry, I guess."

"So you go to-morrow?" he said, as they stood at her aunt's gate.

The setting sun fell full upon her sweet, animated

face, a face that found it so hard to smile at this, the leave-taking.

"To-morrow," she said, softly. "Good-bye, Mr. Simson."

She held out a slender hand, and, taking it in his own, the man felt it tremble.

"Good-bye," he answered. "You will not forget the new friends when you meet the old, will you?"

She shook her head.

"Not if they wish me to remember."

"There is one who would have you remember," he said, softly, bending close to her.

"That one has my assurance that I shall not forget."

He released her hand and turned away, feeling that it was unwise to tarry longer.

At the edge of the grove he turned and waved his hand to her. She was still silhouetted against the sunset.

Slowly the girl turned and walked down the path, holding the blossoms of sumach close to her flushed face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN OLD WILL.

MR. DUSTBAND had finished his coffee, and was perusing the account of the store robberies in the weekly paper, when a gentle rap sounded on the door.

"Come in," he invited, and there entered a tall, thin man with a tin box in his hand, followed by a tall, thin woman. Mr. Dustband smiled his visitors a welcome and placed chairs at their disposal.

"This, sir, is Miss Wilson, Miss Jane Wilson," said the man, bowing first to the lady, then to Mr. Dustband.

"I am glad to meet Miss Wilson, I am sure," said Mr. Dustband, gallantly, as he shook that lady's limp hand.

"And this, sir, is Mr. Swift, Mr. Mark Swift," spoke the lady in a high, shrill voice—quickly, as though she had rehearsed the part and feared she might forget.

Mr. Dustband also shook hands with Mr. Swift.

"Let me see. Seems to me that both your names are familiar. Why, of course, I know you now. Heirs of the late Mr. Wilson, aren't you? Why, to be sure you are. I remember your faces now, as well as your names. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, sir, 'here is,'" answered Mr. Swift, reaching for the box. "There is somethin' as is botherin' us both, an' we have agreed by mutual consent t' place

th' matter in your hands, Mr. Dustband, provided you air willin'. I refer, sir, t' certain papers left t' us in th' effects of our dear lamented an' deceased relative, Jonas Wilson. Here, sir," he continued, opening the green tin box, "are certain documents which neither my cousin ner myself understan' th' meanin' of. This sir, you will perceive, is th' will an' testament of somebody er other, an' this is a receipt from a bank in Toronto."

He handed Mr. Dustband, as he spoke, a long envelope and a blue slip of paper.

"Now," he went on, "neither Miss Wilson ner myself have any schoolin' t' speak of, and we thort as you might be able t' figger sumthin' out o' them papers, as we can't. My cousin an' me went halves on havin' a lawyer explain what them two papers meant, but as there is a lot more sech papers in th' box, an' as them two don't seem in any way to affect our interests personally, we have conclusioned that t' spen' more money in th' matter would be foolishness. As near as we kin find out them papers affect th' welfare of sum person er persons. It ain't us, consequently we ain't interested vitally, but we wants everybody t' get their own, don't we, Jane?"

"We do," solemnly attested Miss Wilson.

"And so we agreed, as I before said, t' place th' whole box an' dice in your hands."

He ceased, and with a sigh, no doubt of relief, wiped his face on a red handkerchief. Miss Wilson smiled on him approvingly, and he smiled back. That speech had cost him more than one night's study.

Mr. Dustband meanwhile was reading the document with puckered brow.

"Now, that is funny," they heard him mutter. "Will of one named Wiskins. I wonder how the old man ever got possession of it. Date and place cleanly obliterated by water, or some other ink-destroying agent. The name is there, though, and contents are legible enough to understand."

He let his eye wander down the paper. In spots it was yellow and mouldy, and the writing so dim as to be almost unintelligible.

"Well," he sighed at last, "whoever his wife is or was, according to this she is a very wealthy woman. This also provides something for the brother. I hope things have been, or can be, properly adjusted without this will. Too bad the date and name of place are missing. As it stands, it is utterly impossible to place it in the hands of the owner without having his address. I should judge that this will dates several years back."

"Will you please look at th' other paper, sir?" asked Mr. Swift.

Mr. Dustband picked up the blue slip and examined it closely. Then he gave a low whistle.

"It has some connection with th' other, hasn't it, sir?"

"It surely seems so, it surely seems so, Mr. Swift. In fact, it's nothing more nor less than a receipt from the bank for money, papers and jewellery to the extent of \$30,000, placed to the credit of Mr. Charles Wiskins or heirs. May I ask when it was you first discovered these papers?"

"Less than a week ago," replied his visitors in a breath.

"I was emptyin' out th' box so's I could stow some

pumpkin seed away in it t' dry," explained Mr. Swift, "an' thet blue paper was pinned t' th' long envelope there. It looked so much like a cheque thet I thort I'd fin' out if it was one. So when I went t' see Jane there—"

"Mark!" cried the lady, blushing.

"I mean t' say, I went over an' consulted my cousin about it. She kin read some an' spell some, so I took it over, an' she said as it wan't a cheque at all. I wanted t' burn th' whole business—maybe I was jest a leetle mad—but she wouldn' let me. So Jane put in half a dollar, an' I put in half a dollar, an' we took th' documents t' th' lawyer, as I have said."

Mr. Dustband arose and walked the floor thoughtfully.

"Have you or anybody examined the rest of the papers in the box?" he asked, at length.

"No, sir. We thort you would be th' right one t' do that, Mr. Dustband, bein' so highly spoke of fer your honesty an' love of right an'—"

Mr. Dustband held up his hand and burst into a peal of laughter, just as a little girl dressed in snowy white came slowly into the room, a great dog with drooping head behind her.

"Dorothy, love!" cried her big protector, coming over and taking her hand.

"I heard your laugh, Uncle Bill," said the girl, following him to the seat and leaning her head on his shoulder, "and I do not like to miss any of your laughs, so I came."

He lifted her face, and let his cheek rest across her forehead. So often had he caressed her thus that she had come to expect it whenever she sought his side.

"Your face is hot to-day, dear," he said, concernedly.

She lifted her head and smiled at him. Something new to him in the depths of those great, unseeing eyes appealed to him dumbly. "What was it?" he wondered.

"You must not worry about me, dear Uncle Bill," said the child. "I will lie on the couch here where I can hear your voice."

"I guess we must be goin' now, sir," said Mr. Swift, rising.

Mr. Dustband slipped over and opened the door.

"I will look carefully through the papers you have left, and will return them to you at your next visit. Now, you must remember, Mr. Swift, and you, too, Miss Wilson, that I shall be pleased to see you at any time."

Mr. Swift hung a little back, and it was not until his companion had descended the steps and passed a few yards down the walk that he gripped Mr. Dustband's arm and whispered:

"Miss Wilson'll never come back, but there'll maybe be two Swifts call on you again soon."

He grinned and ran down the walk, rubbing the shoulder upon which a good-luck slap had descended heavily.

When Mr. Dustband hurried back to the dining-room, he found Dorothy on the sofa. Her face was buried in her hands.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he asked, anxiously, bending over the little form and clasping the fevered hands in his.

"Oh, Uncle Bill," she sobbed, "my head! It is throbbing so, and I fear I cannot stand the pain much longer. I have tried hard, dear, not to let you know—not to let you know—"

Slowly a deathly whiteness stole over her face, obliterating the smile she had so bravely striven to hold for him. Pain had conquered. Little Dorothy had fainted.

Beside her sat a dog, his great head drooping, and a man from whose very soul went forth the petition, "God spare me my one blossom, my little blind girl!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

SUPPER TIME AT MALCOLM'S

"THE days are shortening, Tom," said Mrs. Malcolm, turning the lamp flame a trifle lower and smiling across the supper table at her good man. "Just to think of it. It doesn't seem but a little while ago that it was still daylight at bed-time. Now we have to light the lamp to eat our supper by."

"And the first thing we know, we'll wake up some morning and find snow on the ground, dearie," he replied. "The time goes fast, but," regretfully, "we've had a grand summer, mammie."

"Tom, dear, I got letters from our Nan and from Mollie Bawn to-day," said his wife, as she poured out the tea. "They both came in one envelope, and they sent us a picture. Take your cup, dear, and I'll go and fetch it."

"Oh, the rogues, the two happy little rogues!" smiled the man, holding the card so that the light could fall full upon it. "Bless their dear hearts, wifey, how I do wish I had them right here to-night. I'm that lonesome for them both that it seems I can't do anything else but wish they were back. Our girl has only been gone two weeks, and it seems two years to me. Doesn't it to you, now?"

"It seems a long time, Tom."

"Wifey, I've always said those girls looked alike,

and this picture proves it. Not so much in the likeness as in a something I cannot name. Have you noticed it?"

"It's only your fancy, Tom, my man, only your fancy, I think. And still they seem alike in many things. Others have noticed it, Mr. Simson for one."

"Where does he say the likeness rests, mammie? isn't in the eyes. Nan's are blue and Mollie's are green as glass. It's not in build, for our girl is tall and Mollie is a wee mite of a thing."

"He says it's in character and disposition."

"Ah, that's where it is. That's where the resemblance rests. I know it now. The teacher is a shy young man, my dear. I—I wonder at our Nan taking to him."

"Thomas Malcolm," cried his wife, "how you do talk!"

"Just between ourselves, my dear, just between ourselves. I know our Nan is not wanting any young man's attentions. If she did, I guess she could have any of them, for that matter. Do you know, mammie, Nan doesn't seem to be the light-hearted little romp she used to be. She's changed, somehow."

"It's just your fancy," replied his wife, as she passed him a second helping of preserves.

"Maybe so. I hope it is. But ever since the revival meetings, I've imagined that she's been quieter than she used to be. Sometimes I've wondered if—if" he coughed, and finished his tea in a gulp. "That evangelist was a fine man, and a mighty good-looking man, too, my dear, considering all he came through. he concluded abruptly.

"Have some more tea and don't talk nonsense, you

old goose," said his wife, laughing. "What do you think of the likeness?"

"I think the dark-haired girl has a face and eyes that might make many a heart beat quicker. Her's is a sweet picture, my dear. As for the other —"

He laid the card aside, and gazed into the comely face smiling across at him.

"She is the exact counterpart of a lass I knew a long time ago, colleen. The same eyes, with a glimpse of far off skies in their depths, the same drooping mouth that I have known to do more than smile, my dear. 'Tis the very likeness of yourself thirty years ago, when a long-legged young fellow, whom you have since got to know pretty well, thought you the only girl in the world."

"Go along with your blarney!" said the woman, a soft flush stealing across her face and brow. "That long-legged young fellow has not changed in one respect, Thomas."

"Certainly not in the feelings toward the lass of the laughing eyes," he said, "on sunbeams, even if the gold has turned to silver." He replied, teasingly, "and he's not ashamed to confess it, either."

He laughed softly, and with his long arm placed the picture on a neighboring shelf.

"I wish they would both come back," he said, wistfully.

She arose and, coming around to his side, put her arms about his neck.

"Well, dear, you will get your wish, for they are coming," she said, joyfully.

"Wifey, dear, don't fool me now."

"I am not fooling, Tom. They expect to reach here

on Saturday. I wrote them about little Dorothy taking ill. Nan says in her letter that she cannot rest until she sees her little darling, and she says Mollie is coming, too."

"Well, now, that's pretty good news. Did you tell them about the robberies, wifey?"

"No, I thought best not to."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't. We are going to capture those thieves just as soon as poor Bill is able to leave little Dorothy."

"That will never be until she is up and about again, Tom, and that may be a long time. Dorothy is very sick."

"Poor little thing!" said the man, pityingly. "Guess I'll run over and see how she is to-night," he added, rising from the table and reaching for his hat.

"Doctor Ashworth seemed to be very much concerned about her this afternoon, Tom. I do hope she is better to-night."

Just here the door burst open, and Gaff Linkum, his face and hair wet with perspiration, stumbled into the room.

"They think little Dorothy's dyin'," he gasped. "Doctor Ashworth has telegraphed a doctor in Detroit. I'm goin' t' Bridgetown now t' meet th' train."

He rushed out again, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm gazing blankly at the open door.

"Come, dear," said the woman at last, gently, "I'll go with you."

The man stood with bowed head until she brought her hat and cloak. Then, silently, they passed out.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SHADOW OF AZRAEL.

It was just as a late September morning was waking to life and song that the shadow of Azrael drew nigh and hovered above the white bed where a little blind girl was sick unto death, and drifting slowly, surely, toward the gates of the Great Beyond. Near to where his fading blossom lay sat the man to whom perhaps she was a little more than life itself. For two days and nights he had been beside her, soothing her with his voice and holding her tiny, hot hands in his own. It was not the first time he had undergone such an ordeal; twice before he had been close beside such blossoms when the frost of death crept to them and over them.

Out in the next room the doctor was speaking in whispers to the nurse.

"We must get him away from her," he was saying. "I have my hands full now, and as surely as I speak he cannot stand such a strain much longer."

"He will not leave her," replied the nurse. "We cannot get him away. He says he will stay till the end."

Doctor Ashworth started.

"Till the end!" he repeated, as though to himself.

He took out his watch, and turned it so that the morning light fell on its face. Then he beat an idle tattoo on the window sill. His face, usually so fresh and ruddy, was haggard through long hours of a fight

with death. He had done his utmost to win; he felt that victory must go with the enemy if the specialist did not come, and come soon.

He took out his watch once more. His hand trembled, and when he spoke again his voice was not quite steady.

"There is no hope, nurse, not the slightest, unless—"

He turned to the window and parted the curtains.

"The boy, he could be trusted to meet the specialist, doctor?"

"Yes, yes. The boy was Gaff Linkum. He could not fail us. Unless Doctor Franks comes within the hour, she will be beyond our help."

Silence fell between them. From the sick room came the sound of the rapid breathing of the sick child and the sighs of the man who watched her.

The nurse was the first to break the silence.

"She is sleeping," she whispered.

The doctor nodded.

"She will not likely regain consciousness," he said.

Suddenly he turned and threw open the window. The sound of wheels had come to his ears. Then he motioned to the nurse.

"See, he is coming now, praise God!" he said.

She looked out of the window and down the road. Charlie Fields' span of sorrel mares, attached to the democrat, were coming down the home-stretch at a pace that threatened destruction to both rig and occupants. In the front sat Gaff and Buz. Gaff was driving, and his voice could be heard above the rattle of the wheels as he urged the old mares to further efforts.

Behind sat a portly man, one hand gripping the back of a seat, and the other clinging to his much-awry silk hat.

When the horses, foam-coated and panting, pulled up at the gate, Doctor Ashworth was there to receive the eminent specialist.

"Heavens!" exclaimed that gentleman, as they shook hands. "if you were to give me the choice of taking that ride from Bridgetown here again with that young, red-headed chap for driver, or going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, I think I'd choose the barrel."

"Yes, yes," said Doctor Ashworth. "Gaff, and all the rest of us, wanted you here as soon as we could get you."

"Ahem! His manner, I might say, conveyed as much," said the specialist, laughing. "He will make his mark in the world, that fellow. When I remonstrated mildly with him to ease off a bit, he simply leaned over and yelled at that team, and, say, didn't we sail, though! How's the patient?"

"Slowly sinking," answered the other, as they passed into the house.

The specialist nodded carelessly to the nurse and Mr. Dustband, as he gravely took off his frock coat, white with dust, and threw it across his hat in a corner.

Then he stepped across the room and leaned above the slender form on the white bed. When he lifted his head again there was a frown on his forehead. He pulled off his gloves slowly, watching the little blanched face on the pillow the while. The others in the room eyed the great doctor anxiously. What would his verdict be?

He turned at length, and followed by Doctor Ashworth, walked out into another room, where Miss Dustband sat, her arm about the cage of little Dorothy's canary.

The little woman looked up appealingly as she rose to greet him. He understood the look, and shook his head.

"I can't tell you anything as yet," he said, shaking her hand sympathetically. "In an hour's time, say, I may know something definite. And now, if you will show me a basin of water and a towel, I will try and get rid of some of the dust I have unwillingly accumulated."

Miss Dustband, apologizing for her thoughtlessness, led the way into the wash-room.

"I say, Ashworth, but this feels delicious!" said the great man, as he plunged his hands into the cold water. "Just delicious! By the way, what have you been treating her for?"

"Fever, that's all I can say," answered Doctor Ashworth. "Her case baffles me entirely. I really don't know what her disease is, doctor."

"We'll—fin'—out," sputtered Dr. Franks, decidedly, his eyes close shut and his face dripping with water. "Towel, Ashworth, towel, if you love me."

"Here you are, sir."

"Thanks. "Now, doesn't a good wash-up refresh a fellow, though? Seems to me I can smell coffee. Do I smell coffee, doctor? Nothing like a good wash and a hot cup of coffee," he ran on, as he brushed his damp, thick hair away from his temples. "Makes a fellow feel fit as a fiddle. When was she taken?"

"Six days ago."

"Sleep any?"

"A little."

"Nourishment?"

"No."

"Humph! Well, let's go look at her again."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LIFTING OF THE SHADOW.

"Now, my dear man, if you will please leave me alone with the patient and the worthy doctor here, I'll let you drink my cup of coffee, which I know the good lady has prepared for me," said the specialist, as he and Doctor Ashworth again entered the sick room.

Dustband, without so much as a word, arose and walked from the room.

"Kind of weak on his pins," remarked the specialist.

"It's a wonder he ever went," replied the local physician. "He has not left her side for three days."

The specialist was holding one of little Dorothy's thin hands in his and did not hear. His mouth narrowed to a thin line as he clicked his watch shut.

"Open the windows, nurse. We want all the air we can get," he said.

The nurse hastened to obey.

"And draw the blinds as close as possible. Too much light here—or, wait a moment, please."

He placed a cool, damp cloth on the little girl's forehead, and bent low above her.

A moan, that was little more than a sigh, came from her lips. When the great doctor lifted his head again there was a look in his eyes which both the nurse and the other doctor understood.

"It'll be a fight, all right, Ashworth—it'll be a fight," he said, later, when, after consultation, the two men

stood by the pain-racked little form. "I have handled a few cases such as hers. The trouble is here," he said, touching gently the waxen eye-lids of the patient.

"In her eyes?" asked Doctor Ashworth, wonderingly.

"Exactly, in her eyes. We may save her, but—well, Ashworth, it is likely she will lose her sight."

Doctor Ashworth attempted to speak, but merely swallowed convulsively.

"Yes, it's terrible to think of, I know," said the other, noting his agitation, "but there's no use mincing matters. I can save her life, but not her sight."

"You cannot save for her that which she never had," said the other man, slowly.

"You mean—?"

"I mean this. Little Dorothy is blind now, has always been blind. I—the fact is, I had forgotten to tell you this, doctor."

"Poor little girl!" said the specialist, softly. "Poor little thing!"

There was a great pity in the big man's great heart as he bent above the little white face again and touched the hot brow tenderly with his lips—pity more for what she had suffered than for what she was suffering.

He stood erect again and stroked his chin thoughtfully with his hand.

"Her disease is a peculiar one, as you know," he said, as though speaking to himself. "Its most disastrous effect is on the optic nerve; its whole effect, in fact, unless it reaches the brain—and, when this happens, nothing can save the patient. You have done well, sir, to hold the fever in check. I think we may

prevent it from rising. But what I wish to say to you is this: It is barely possible—mind you, I say barely possible—that this disease may restore to her what I feared it must have deprived her of, her sight."

Doctor Ashworth sat down weakly in a chair.

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed.

"More than possible. It's probable, and very probable."

The little doctor sprang up and gripped the specialist by the hand. His professional dignity was gone, but what cared he for that.

"If you can give little blind Dorothy back her sight, you can have the whole village," he said, huskily.

The big man returned the hand-shake, a big smile on his big face.

"Well, I wouldn't have to go far for it," he said, his smile broadening. "Most of it's out there on the lawn. Look!"

He parted the curtains, and Doctor Ashworth, looking out, saw a great many people gathered together, in knots of two or three. Their main interest seemed centred in the house, in which a great doctor, whose fame had preceded him, was striving to save for them the little blind girl who was so much to their simple hearts, and who was said to be slipping away from them into the shadow.

"They all love her," explained the little man.

"Well, Ashworth, you can tell them that—that they may hope to still have her with 'em," replied the specialist. "But," he tapped the other on the shoulder, "not a word about her sight. Not to anybody: least of all to that long-haired man who frowned at me when I asked him to leave the room. By the

way, I think I shall go and see if he has left any of that coffee."

The doctors left the room, and the nurse came over and softly stroked the wee hands lying on the coverlet. Through a chink in the curtain a stray sunbeam stole and rested for a moment, like a promise, upon little Dorothy's golden hair.

And so it was that Azrael, who had stood gloomy and silent beside the cot, crept away before the sunbeam's smile of promise.

Out in the drawing-room a little bird awoke to song again, the first in long, long days. Louder and louder swelled out his sweet notes, until upon the wan little face upon the pillow a sweet smile stole, and her fever-parched lips framed the word, "Gaffy."

Away down across the lawn something sounding like a subdued cheer came floating through the open window, and a dog's deep note of joy was mingled with it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

'TWIN THE BLUE AND THE GOLD.

SUMMER-TIME, with her glad beauties, was passing away. She had been a glorious summer-time to Gaff Linkum and his chum Buz. They had learned her by-paths as they had learned the walks of other summer-times. To the boys she was but the renewal of a something glad and beautiful that was a part of their lives. For young life flutters lazily where sunshine is warmest and blossoms smile most gladly. Like a golden-winged butterfly is youth, living, drinking and enjoying what God has placed at its disposal. But now the days were shortening, and the lengthening, dewy evenings had a coolness in them that promised frost at some early time. Upon the hill-side yellow golden-rod bent to the caress of leave-taking south winds. The trees, with foliage ripe in the verdancy of Nature's fulfilment, seemed awaiting the gold of decline. The green, juicy shoots in the marsh-lands had grown into tall, gray-drab rushes. Sunlight awoke to life all the beauty in the velvet brown cloak of the waving, nodding cat-tails.

Near them the cunning old muskrat with coat that matched their color, was building him a grand, roomy, dome-like home for the winter. Fat Mr Mink, swimming leisurely up the run with his mouth full of soft moss, gazed wonderingly and admiringly at an old boat dozing at her mooring-place. "Was this

Betsey?" he wondered. Surely not. *Betsey* was old and dun-colored. This Loat was young, with coat of soft green-gray. So Mr. Mink settled low in the water and swam swiftly, fearfully past to his home beneath the logs. There he told his mate of the new, bright boat that had usurped their old friend's place. And Mrs. Mink laughed at him until her whiskers trembled, and scolded him for being such a block-head as not to know *Betsey* in the new coat which the boys had given her in honor of the ducking season so close at hand.

The reed-birds were congregating in great flocks for their journey southward. The annual jubilee of migration was on. The air was full of shrill cries and fluttering wings.

Out on the bosom of the creek the wood-ducks, with their family of six now full-grown and able to take care of themselves, swam and dived and were happy. Near them Mr. and Mrs. Gray Duck and their family were enjoying the same pleasures. A family of black ducks hugged the rushes a little farther on. A bunch of green-winged teal came down the creek, passing so swiftly that their larger kind but caught the glitter of their bronze breasts, the rainbow tint of their wings, and the whistle of those strong little wings as they passed. Neither the grays, the blacks nor the wood-ducks quacked them an invitation to settle near them. They each and all despised the tiny teal on account of his utter disregard of style in flight, and also his stubborn persistency in holding to his course in spite of all obstacles. If a whole army of shooters stood in his way, and he had made up his mind to keep his course, well, he would

keep it. The big ducks thought this foolhardiness in Mr. Teal. They respected him for his being the swiftest flyer of all the duck kind, even if he had no style; at the same time there were swifter things even than his wings. They pitied him some, therefore, and despised him a great deal.

Away across the marshes a lonely mallard sent his call. One of the grays gave answer. It was just a single, low-voiced quack that one would think he could not possibly hear at such a distance. But he did hear, and turned from fluttering aimlessly bayward in answer to the welcome summons, quacking his way along joyfully and settling in the creek near to the others.

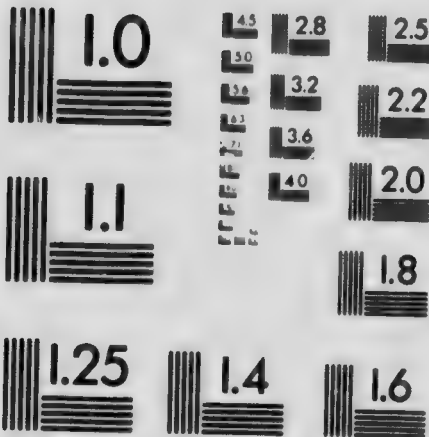
Wild duck have to become very well acquainted before they are real friends. This is why Mr. Mallard did not alight directly among the grays. Even distant family ties do not help such situations. He knew, if he had settled among them, they would no doubt have chastised him soundly for his forwardness, so he lit a little distance away and talked softly to himself, as he preened his long, drab wing feathers and smoothed his green neck plumage on his puffed-out breast. The others watched him with heads turned now on this side, now on that. Seeing with satisfaction that he made no advances, they swam slowly, seemingly away from him, but ever drawing nearer to him.

One of the young ones of the family, a slender-necked graceful duck, dived and came up close beside him. He took his fine head as though in play, and dived himself. When he arose he was close beside her. She reached over and plucked his green neck-



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scarf severely for his impudence. Instead of dampening his spirits, this seemed to please him. He flapped his strong wings and made the water-bubbles dance about them. He swam around in a circle, and she followed. When he dived again, the gray duck dived, too. They fed together on the wild rice beneath the surface, and when they arose he followed her to where the other ducks were, and there received further initiation into the family.

Mr. Mallard's experience had been a sad one. Away some two miles bayward he had builded a nest for a beautiful mate, a nest of the softest rushes, lined with the softest down he could secure. He had even sacrificed some of his own brilliant plumage towards the making of this nest, as had also his gray mate. They had been very happy. He had guarded the nest and the six eggs while she swam in the nearby pool and rested from her labor of love, the labor of warming six downy little ducklings to life from the eggs they both guarded with such care. It was on the morning that the first little peep from beneath her told that their fond hopes were about to be realized that, too glad of heart to remain still, he had sprung to air that he might call out his joy above the world. He had flown miles and miles, and when he returned he felt that she would meet him with their young. But he returned to find his nest forsaken. His dear mate, his little ones, were gone. Only a few scattered feathers and a little blood, that told their story, remained to him.

So, feeding and resting among the gray ducks, he told them in his own language this story. Well did the parent ducks know how easily such a tragedy

might happen. The sneaking, prowling marsh-thieves were many, and the chances of bringing up a family to the size of their own very small indeed. So it was that they asked Mr. Mallard to stay and share their lot. Many times during the shooting season which soon followed they were glad they had done so. His sagacity and cunning, his knowledge of the real and the artificial, his unerring wisdom, kept them safe from danger.

But, during all the dangerous shooting period, the trim little duck which first came and made his acquaintance kept closer to him than the others.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A MESSAGE.

LITTLE Dorothy sat propped up by pillows. A dark bandage drawn tightly about her eyes brought into full effect the wanness of her wasted face. Beside her bed sat Gaff Linkum and Buz Fields. Between them sat Bruno, his great head resting on his mistress's hand.

"I believe he knows you saved him, Gaffy. Oh, I'm so glad. What would I do without my Bruno?"

The great dog put his cold nose up against her cheek. He whined softly, and wagged his bushy tail in his appreciation. He said, as plainly as anything could say: "I'm so glad my little mistress has been spared to us."

"Old Fan got poisoned once," said Gaff. "I poured mustard an' melted lard down her throat, same as I did down his." Gaff nodded toward Bruno.

"He was purty nigh a goner!" exclaimed Buz. "He was purty nigh done fer. Say, Gaff, how did look outen them big, brown eyes o' his, though! Did you notice it?"

"Notice it! Well, I guess I did," answered Gaff. "And, Dorothy, did you know he swallered thet awful dose like a leetle man, he did."

"Yes, Gaffy; he knew you were doing your best to save him, didn't he?"

"Yep, I sure think he knew," answered Gaff.

"Now, Fan didn' behave nice like him at all. She bit me."

"Oh, my!"

"You see, Dorrie, dogs what's been pizened go kinder crazy like."

"It's th' pain, I guess, maybe," suggested Buz.

"Yep, it's the pain. You see, ole Fan would as soon—well, she simply wouldn' bite a kitten; but she was inter convulsions."

"Convulsions, you mean, I think, Gaffy."

"Both," said Gaff. "She had them you name, too, I guess."

"What I wanter know is, what did th' thieves wanter poison Bruno *fer*?" asked Buz.

"What fer? Well, I'll tell you what fer, Buz. They was a-scairt he'd raise a rumpus and spoil their game. See?"

"Bruno sleeps in the shed behind the store," explained Dorothy.

"Then, that's it," said Buz. "They thought they would put him outen th' way, I guess."

"Oh, you are both so good," said Dorothy, weakly.

"Uncle Bill says Bruno has been beside me every minute since I have been ill."

"Time's up!" called the nurse, putting her head in at the door and smiling. "Only a day or two longer, laddies, and our girl will be romping with you the same as she used to."

Each of the boys bent and kissed the little, white face and tip-toed from the room. Outside, Buz turned to his friend.

"You know whose work that thievin' was, I s'pose, Gaff?"

"Vell, I reckon it's th' gipsies," Gaff answered, carefully.

"Sure thing it was."

"Did you guess it?"

"Naw. Didn't need ter. I knowed it."

"Haven't said anythin' t' Dick, have you?"

"Not yet, but I guess we'd better. Eh?"

"We can't do much without Dick," reasoned Buz. "Here he comes now. S'pose we tell him."

"Jest what I think," exclaimed Dick, the boys having confided their suspicions to him. "Now, th' next thing t' do is t' lay a leetle plan t' capture th' robbers. They've been in th' neighborhood quite a considerable time now, an' th' people o' this town ain't th' only ones who have been molested. I'm told thet lots o' th' farmers have lost meat an' canned fruits an' sech durin' th' past two months."

"And fowl, too," interposed Gaff.

"Yes, chickens an' turkeys, so you see it's th' gipsies, all right. Only las' night," continued Dick, "Tom Pope, th' livery man from Briotown, was held up an' robbed right on th' town line road. I heered Waters, th' stage man, tellin' 'bout it jest afore I kim over here. There was two men, one tall un, with red whiskers, an' a young, slim feller. He says they're gipsies, all right. They held him up 'ith a gun."

"By cracky!" ejaculated Buz.

"Now, nearly everybody in town knows who it was robbed th' stores here, an' only fer leetle Dorothy takin' so sick thet no one ever expected she'd pull through, an' Mr. Dustband bein' so shook up over it all—as I guess we all was, ter tell th' truth—them gipsies would have got what's comin' t' them long ago."

"Yes, you're right, they would have," affirmed Buz. "I heered Mr. Malcolm an' Mr. Goosecall say as much. They wonder why th' gipsies stay along like they're doin'."

"An' now that our leetle gal is on th' mend," continued Dick, "we're sorter shapin' things fer an early raid on th' thieves, boys. I guess us three know why they're hangin' 'round. They're waitin' fer a chanst t' get hold o' Gaffy here."

"Well, if they take him I guess they'll have t' take all o' us, eh, Dick?"

"You bet t' that, Buz! One thing I can't understand is why th' woman—you know who I mean—stays 'ith thet gang."

"I guess maybe she has a reason, an' a good one, too, if everythin' was knowed."

"I've thort thet, too, Buz. I've thort thet, too," said Dick, reflectively. "One thing's sure, we're goin' t' find out, an' right soon, too."

Dick hitched his trousers up a notch, and looked out across the fields toward Ross's woods.

"I been't doubtin' thet th' woman's some relation o' Gaffy's," he said, gently. "I think she really is Gaffy's mammie. She's a white woman, anyways, thet's one godsend, an' I don't believe she really belongs t' th' gang, hanged if I do."

"Thet Pete feller's much as tole us she didn't," said Gaff.

"So he did, boy—so he did, come t' think on 't."

"Said as she didn't uster be like she is now, er sumthin'."

"No, Gaffy, he said sumthin' had made her ferget her past like. Thet's what he said, I remember."

"Well, Dick, I hope we kin get her away from 'em," said Buz.

"Boys, we *will* get her away from 'em, we will. Now, I'll tell you our plans. Better come over to our place, so's no one kin hear us."

As Dick pushed open his house-door, ten minutes later, a bit of yellow wrapping-paper fell to the floor. It had been placed between the door and the door-jamb. Buz picked it up, a look of wonder on his face as he noticed it had pencilled writing on it.

"What is't, Buz?" asked Dick and Gaff in a breath.

"It's writin'."

"Then why don't you read it?"

"Laws a'mighty!" said Buz, his voice shaking. "Listen."

His hand holding the bit of paper trembled so that for a moment he could not read.

"Who's it from?" asked the others, excitedly.

"Guess it's from thet feller Pete. *That's* his name Pete, anyway. Listen."

"Boys beware they ar comming fore the boy tonite at midnite so i say beware and fore godds saik b at the snak pond at ten oklok if you wants to save the boys mother cause the capin says she must go. he wil sink her bodie in the watter whare he has sinked her husbands ten years ago. I kant tel yu any more now but fore godd's saiks come and save di. i will peach everything if you wil come. i'm your friend else i would not warn yu. if he finds out i mus go with the woman.

pete."

Buz read the words aloud to the others. When he finished, the three looked at one another mutely.

"So!" breathed Dick. "Them dogs air goin' t' kill th' woman."

"Where he has sunk her husband's ten years ago." Buz read this line with puckered brow. "What on earth does that mean?" he asked.

"It means as my father was murdered an' sunk in th' pool ten years ago," answered Gaff, covering his face with his hands.

"I think Gaffy is right," spoke Dick, genay, "but we'll know soon, an' we'll sure save th' woman."

He came over to Gaff, haltingly, as though it were a great effort.

"There, laddie," he said, softly, putting his arm about the other's shoulders, "you mustn't take on that way. We'll save th' woman, an' we'll do it t'-night."

"T'-night?" echoed both boys, in a breath.

"It's gotter be t'-night," replied Dick. "Now, listen t' our plans. Th' rest of us have got 'em arranged so's we kin act on 'em any time."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

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"Now, Simon, if you'll jest sit down an' keep quiet, I'll see thet you don't miss any of this conversation. We can't shout what we want to say t' each other lest sumone might hear us as would tell, an' thet 'ud spile everythin'." Mr. Goosecall smiled, and nodded his head. "Underst. n'?" he asked.

Mr. Diggs winked knowingly, and proceeded to pull down the sitting-room blinds. Mr. Malcolm, Dick Dashmore, Mr. Sward and Mr. Dustband watched him in silence. Finishing his task, Mr. Diggs returned to the group.

"What's thet you say?" he asked.

"Nobody wasn't sayin' nothin'. Nobody wasn't sayin' a thing, Simon," explained Mr. Fields.

"Oh!" said Mr. Diggs, sighing.

"I guess maybe Dick's plan will be best, after all," said Mr. Dustband. "He and the boys have everything fixed."

"Th' ropes, gentlemen, don't forget th' ropes," said Mr. Sward, rolling up his sleeves.

"See here, Sward," spoke Mr. Goosecall. "you understan' why we let you in on this thing. You ain't no good t' us, really, you know. If it comes t' a ruffle, I reckon you'll cave same as you did when Casteel walloped you fer callin' him a liar, thet time he said your v'ice sounded like a rooster's. No, Benjamin,

I'm not a-talkin' t' rise yer ire, ner yer indignation, neither, so don't get on yer mettle, Benjamin. We want you t' understan' thet th' work we have afore us ain't no pie, you see. Them gipsies air regular devils, an' no mistake. Not ordinary devils, I don't mean, 'cause they're real, modern ones with an understandin' o' modern tactics. Now, we won't ast you t' fight, Benjamin. What we want you t' do is tie ropes. I will say, Sward, you air certainly th' best hand I er anyone else in this town ever see at tyin' ropes. Now, understan', you be th' official rope-tie o' this party."

Mr. Goosecall stopped, rather short of breath, and Mr. Diggs snorted.

"Thet's jest what he'll do when we should be keepin' quiet," cried Dick, referring to Simon. "Better not let him go, fellers. He's sure t' snort."

"We'll have t' lock him up if we don't take him," said Fields.

"We'll put him down cellar," suggested Dick, his face brightening.

"No, sir, we be goin' t' take Diggs along," settled Goosecall. "We'll leave him an' Benjamin here in th' background until we get in our work; then we'll bring 'em forward, eh?"

Mr. Diggs, all unconscious that he was the subject of conversation, stood smilingly by as though he heard and appreciated every word.

"That'll leave just three of us t' five of 'em; wili we be strong enough, think you, men?" enquired Goosecall.

"Oh, sure we will," returned Dick. "You see, we've got everythin' fixed. Then you haven't counted on Gaff an' Buz."

"Well, it's seven o'clock now. In three hours more

we'll be doin' things, like as not. Now I'll see if I kin make ol' adder here understan'."

Mr. Goosecall, ascertaining that there was no one upstairs, having satisfied himself by going from room to room, stationed Dick Dashmore at the bottom of the staircase with strict injunctions not to allow a single soul to pass so long as he heard noises like a steamboat in distress issuing from an upper room, and then he took Mr. Diggs by the arm and marched him away.

"Ol' Diggs is likely t' shoot sumbody," said Dick. "He won't think he's doin' his part unless he let sumbody out."

"We won't let him have firearms," explained Mr. Dustband.

"Won't you, though?" Mr. Fields drew his eyebrows up, and made a wry face. "Well, don't you think you won't let him have a gun er two."

"Is it necessary that I remain 'ith him?" asked Mr. Sward, nervously.

"Well, yes," answered Fields, "it is, Benjamin. Howsumever, you haven't much t' fear, 'cause we'll only let him have one gun, and thet only if he insists."

"Oh, he'll insist, all right," cried Dashmore. "He won't go a step 'ithout a gun. He's crazy over a gun. Diggs is."

"Well, even if he does shoot a few shots, there's a good chanst that you won't be in range, Benjamin. Why, there's a thousan' chances t' one that you won't," explained Fields.

Mr. Sward placed his hands in his pockets and walked the floor restlessly.

"Do you think Mr. Diggs 'ud object very strong' t' being left behind?" he asked, at length.

"It cannot be done now, Sward," Mr. Dustband

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assured him, solemnly. "He's even at this time being initiated into the secrets and mysteries of our mission. All such have to go."

He tossed back his long hair and frowned at his hearer. Mr. Sward wiped the sweat from his brow and sighed.

"I don't think you have anythin' t' fear, Benjamin," reassured Fields, giving the fisherman a little comforting slap on the shoulder. "We'll caution th' ole man t' be careful an' not bang aroun' as he usually does, you know."

"I hope you may escape his bullet," sighed Mr. Dustband, looking upon Mr. Sward compassionately. "If he should get you, Benjamin, you must not give him to understand that he has hit you. It would only excite him the more an' bring confusion on our plans."

"Oh, oh!" groaned Mr. Sward.

"I don't s'pose there'd be no objection t' him mentioning it arter we're all through?" said Fields.

"Not in the least, not in the least," replied Mr. Dustband.

Just here the stairway door opened to admit Messrs. Goosecall and Diggs.

The latter was certainly a sight to behold. Small wonder if poor Sward once more groaned aloud and paled before it. Mr. Diggs was decked out in a corduroy suit of ancient cut and workmanship. About his spare middle was a heavy leathern belt. In this belt were stuck a whole family of antique pistols. There were single-barrelled pistols with hammers and no triggers. There were double-barrelled pistols with triggers and no hammers. There were six-chambered revolvers so full of rust that, as Fields said, "it 'd give one th' lock-jaw t' look at 'em."

"I found 'em in th' ol' gunboat," Diggs explained, delightedly, to the others.

Besides the artillery already mentioned, Mr. Diggs carried in his right hand a long musket, and in the other a murderous-looking combination hatchet and peace-pipe. The latter article of warfare had been pawned by an Indian for firewater, and had never been redeemed.

"He's a Sioux brave," laughed Goosecall. "He would have all thet armor 'ith him. He says sumone'll have t' pay fer floodin' his cellar."

"He looks like thet picter called 'Waitin' fer th' End,'" grinned Fields.

"I've been thinking we should have another man, in case—" Mr. Malcolm commenced.

"Jest what we've been discussin'," cried Fields. "S'pose I go an' get Bill, th' Blacksmith?"

"Good idea!" agreed Mr. Dustband. "What do you say, boys?"

"Yes, get him," cried the others.

"Then I reckon we'd better be aartin', so's t' get our stations at th' snake-pond early," said Dick. "We'll pick up th' boys on th' way down."

Mr. Malcolm opened the door and moved silently out into the shadow. Silence fell upon the group in the sitting-room. No one present but what realized that what he was about to engage in might prove no child's play.

Mr. Dustband's heavy voice broke the silence.

"Better step into that room, Diggs, until we are ready to start," he suggested.

He pointed to the small dining-room.

Mr. Diggs looked at the room, then at himself, and, as though divining Mr. Dustband's meaning, passed into the room and closed the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE EVE OF DEPARTURE.

NIGHT crept across the world swiftly—a close, heavy night for October, and one without a single star.

Camp had been struck ere the last ray of daylight had sped, and the gipsies sat about the smouldering coals of their last camp-fire, waiting. A mongrel cur limped across the open to snatch up ravenously a remnant of the evening meal.

A long, red-whiskered gipsy, lying in the shadow, with grimy hands clasped under his matted hair, seeing a chance to inflict pain, drew in his boot-shod foot and sent the poor dog yelping through the coals.

Some of the others laughed, but a man reclining near him turned on his elbow and cursed him viciously.

"Oh, mind yer own business, will yer? Yer makes me tired, Pete, yer does, with yer scary notions 'bout rousin' th' villagers an' all thet. I guess I know what's th' matter with yer, an' I'd bes' tell th' Cap'n all 'bout it. Yer a sneak, an' yer can't deny it."

The other men laughed, and moved over to where the women of the party were packing the utensils away in the waggons. Pete watched their movements from beneath his shaggy brows, leaving the other man's challenge unaccepted. Softly and swiftly the shadows swooped down, until the forms he watched were hidden from view. A snatch of conversation, an oath, a laugh, came to his ears through the darkness.

After a time he stood up.

"Gosh, that was an awful kick you give th' poor beggar, 'Enery," he said, with a chuckle.

"'Enery" stretched his long form and spat on the coals.

"I made t' finish 'im, I did. I wants t' kill some-
thin', an' why not 'im? I says, why not 'im?" he cried,
raising his voice.

"Why not him, o' course? Thet's what I says
'Enery," answered the other, amicably. "Why not
him, o' course?"

"An' I wants t' know what yer stuck yer bazoo in
'bout? I wants t' know thet right now," cried the man
on the ground.

He raised himself on his elbow and drew in his
breath hard.

Pete hugged close the short, heavy cudgel beneath
his coat, and squatted beside his companion.

"Hist, 'Enery," he whispered, "an' I'll tell you why.
Th' Cap's bound t' kill Di. Us two'll save her life.
She's rich, as th' Cap says. She'll do handsome by us.
'Enery. She's no common woman, she ain't. You
knows how's she took keer o' herself in this bunch, an'
you knows, too, why she hasn't left th' gang since her
mem'ry's come back t' her. Isn't it 'cause she knows
th' Cap has papers belongin' t' her, I say? An' don't
we both know why th' Cap wants t' hang onter 'em?
An' why have we had t' keep movin' funder an' funder
inter this big bush, an' keep in hidin' fer th' past two
weeks? Ain't it 'cause th' Cap's scared t' death th'
law'll grip us an' th' woman he's keepin' tied up?
I squeal? I guess yes. An' this, too. I don't know
whether you knows it er not, but I do. One o' them

papers th' Cap is holdin' is her husband's will. He was a rich man, 'Enery, an' she'll be a rich woman. An' she'll reward us, 'Enery, if we saves her, she will. What you say?"

"What d' I say? I say no," exploded the man Henry. "An' thet goes. I hate thet woman, an' I'm glad she's goin', an'—" he added, by way of afterthought, "I wishes yer was goin' 'ith her. See here, mebbe it'll be thet way. All I've gotter do is tell th' Cap wot you've told me, an'—"

He clicked his tongue and jerked his head sideways.

"But you won't do thet, 'Enery?"

"Well, I will, so thar!"

"She's allers treated us white, 'Enery. We can't let him drown 'er."

"Bah!" said the other, again expectorating on the coals.

Pete stood silent, nervously fingering the hidden club. He strained his eyes through the shadows, trying to perceive the forms of the other gipsies, and noted with satisfaction that the darkness hid them completely.

As he looked, the other man stood up. "I'm goin' now t' tell th' Cap wot you've been tellin' me," he growled.

"He'll kill me if you do, 'Enery."

"I knows it, an' I'm glad of it."

"An' I'll come back an' stan' over you, 'Enery. When it's dark an' close, like it is t'-night, I'll stan' over you an' run my cold hands along your face an' grin at you."

The tall gipsy shuddered.

"An' I'll take your han' like this," whispered Pete,

catching the other's hand in his, "an' I'll say, 'Come! Come!'"

The tall man, with a horrible oath, drew back his great fist to strike his tormentor down. He was trembling like a leaf from superstitious fear.

"Gawd! Look yonder, 'Enery!"

As the man turned quickly to gaze with staring eyes in the direction Pete pointed, the heavy cudgel was swung and delivered. The tall man shuddered down silently under the almost noiseless blow delivered on the base of his skull, and lay still.

Then the other, glancing quickly about, picked him up, heavy man that he was, and moved away with his burden through the trees.

One hundred yards into the wood, to where a thicket of second-growth beech stood almost as thick as a field of sugar-cane, Pete staggered with his load. At the edge of the thicket he laid the man gently down and put his ear to his breast.

"Might have be'n wuss," he whispered to himself, as he lifted the head.

He groped under a log, where he had previously concealed some long strips of strong linen cloth. Quickly and securely he bound the tall man's hands and feet. Then, feeling in his pocket, Pete produced a gag.

"Not dead, but jest as good 's fer's my purpose is concerned," he chuckled. "Tell th' Cap, eh?"

He laughed an ugly, noiseless laugh, and dragged the tall man far into the thicket.

"Now, 'Enery, my dear," he chuckled, "stay thar, like a good boy, an' don't make any noise, an' we'll come arter you soon, we will. An', 'Enery," he added,

"I might jest say that w'at's lef' o' you arter t'-night th' law'll get t'-morrie. Good-night, 'Enery."

Five minutes later Pete came quietly up to where the woman Di was being closely guarded by a young gipsy.

"Thort you'd never come," said the guard, sullenly. "I've been on watch half an hour over time. Whar you been?"

"Jake, thar's th' dickens t' pay. You can't guess wot's happened," said Pete, drawing the other aside.

"No. What is it?"

"'Enery," sighed Pete, shaking his head. "'Enery."

"Wot's wrong o' 'Enery?"

"Well, I reckon th' Cap'll think it's somethin' pretty bad. He's turned yaller dog, thet's all."

"Funked?"

"Yep."

The young gipsy laughed silently.

"I always knowed he was a big coward. Did he let you in?"

"Tol' me everythin'."

"An' he—?"

"He's hoofin' it now," said Pete, with a groan.

The young man glanced in the direction of the woman. She sat on a log, with head bowed upon her breast. Her hands and feet were tightly bound. A dirty lantern shed a feeble glow upon her face.

"Do you s'pose—?" The guard nodded toward her.

"I reckon thet's what weakened him," answered Pete, understanding.

"Have you tol' th' Cap?"

"No. You see, it was time I was comin' t' relieve

you, so I had t' leave that fer you t' do. You'd best go tell him now, Jake."

The young man moved reluctantly away, and Pete took his station before the captive. Sitting down on a stump opposite the woman, he lit his pipe and puffed it dreamily.

After a time her voice came to him, low but distinct.

"Did you kill Henry?"

"Nope. He's only restin'."

"Why did you do it, Pete?"

"'Cause—he got t' know too much, Di."

"And do you think—?"

"I'm not thinkin', Di. I knows what's goin' t' happen, an' I knows you'll stan' by ol' Pete when th' time comes. 'Course I'll be took 'ith th' others. I've tol' you 'bout leavin' th' note under th' door, an' I'll bet my life thar'll be a party t' receive us down thar."

A light was coming toward them through the trees. It was a lantern, carried by the captain. When he came up both Pete and the woman noted that the man was half drunk. He was talking to himself, and vowing vengeance on the man named Henry for deserting the band.

"Well?" he asked, holding the light so that it fell on the woman's face, "I s'pose you've changed your mind, eh? Don't want to die, do you?"

"I have not changed my mind," she answered.

"Then you die within an hour," said the wretch.

He thrust his hand in his pocket and drew forth something that shone like nickel in the lantern's rays. Noting it, the man Pete crouched as though to spring at his throat. But the captain simply put the object to his lips and sent forth a shrill whistle.

In a short time the other gipsies joined him.

"Everything ready?" asked the captain.

"Everything," was the answer.

"Then tie the horses securely, so that we can leave as soon as we return. The job we have to do won't take long. You packed the swag we got the other night in the light waggon, I suppose?"

No one answered.

"Well, why don't you answer? You fools, are you all dumb?"

"Pardon, Cap'n," said Pete, "but you'll maybe recollect you give th' job o' hidin' th' swag over t' 'Enery. Nobody else knows whar it is."

The captain cursed long and viciously.

"Well, our next job will be to find Henry," he said, clicking his teeth together with a snap they all understood. "Now, let's get going. It's a quarter to ten. You women finish packing up. You, Pcte, take the lead."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AT THE SNAKE POOL.

IF it were close and hot and dark in Ross's woods which the gipsies were just leaving on their gruesome errand to the snake pool, it was a great deal closer and hotter and darker in the vicinity of the latter place where our friends of the rescue party were even now putting the finishing touches to their plan of operation.

It was with a great deal of difficulty that Mr. Digg had been restrained from taking a position with his artillery directly in the open, and only on Mr. Dustband's sacred promise to let him wreak whatever vengeance he deemed expedient on the marauders of his cellar as soon as they were captured, would he desist from his purpose.

Our friends had agreed among themselves that the gipsies would approach the pond from the north side, it being the easiest accessible, and being more open presented better facilities for their diabolical plan.

Accordingly, Mr. Dustband, Mr. Fields and Mr. Goosecall took their respective stations on the north side, while Dick and the boys, along with Mr. Digg and Bill, sought hiding-places on the south side.

At either end of the pond the growth of saplings was so thick as to make operations impossible to the captain and his followers, nevertheless Mr. Malcolm thought it advisable that he should take his stand on the ea

end. This was agreed to, and Mr. Malcolm, all his Irish fighting nature wide awake, spat on his hands and quietly concealed himself. Mr. Sward, much to his relief, was given a post some distance remote from the anxious Mr. Diggs. It was afterward ascertained that at the first call to action he had broken and run, thereby doing much damage to his rather prominent nose-piece, as Mr. Fields called it.

And so the men waited on in the darkness; waited for a snapping twig, a rustle of the leaves, to bespeak the coming of those who might prove no mean adversaries. A hoot-owl close at hand sent its mournful cry through the night. But over all was a great, a mysterious silence, as though Nature had stopped in her course to watch and listen.

At last, when the stillness had so settled upon strung nerves as to make further waiting a torture, a faint glimmer came flitting through the trees. After a while footsteps approached from the north side of the pond.

"Is this the place, Pete?" asked a man's voice.

"Yes, Cap'n," answered another.

"Have you gagged her so she can't cry out, Jake?" again asked the first voice.

"Yes, Cap'n."

"Here, then. You, Tom, and you, Joe, get on either side of her—that's right. Now, let's not prolong the ceremony. Who has that fifty-pound shot?"

"Here, Cap'n, I've got it," answered Pete's voice.

"Bring it here and tie it to her feet. You've done that before, eh?—or was it that white-livered Henry?"

"Mus' 'ave been 'Enery. Wasn't me," said Pete.

There were six in the party—five men and the woman—that had drawn up near the pond's margin.

"That pond's got no bottom," said the voice known as the Captain's. "She'll never be found here. What's the matter, Pete?"

"I can't fasten th' shot, Cap'n. Jest show me how will yer?"

The tall, heavy man bent to lift the shot when, like a vice, Pete's strong hands gripped his throat. At the same time a whistle rent the stillness.

The next instant the other three men were down and being held securely by Dustband and his companions. It was not a hard-earned victory. Two of the gang were but mere boys, who offered but slight resistance. As for the captain, he struggled and fought fiercely, but to no avail. In ten minutes the gipsies were bound securely, all except Pete.

"Better tie me, too, men. I'm one of 'em," he said, but the men refused to do it.

After finding his services were no longer needed in subduing the gipsies, Mr. Dustband turned his attention to the woman, who had fainted under the strain. A little liquor from a pocket-flask revived her; but when all was in readiness for the triumphal march back to the village, and she begged to be allowed to walk, he simply laughed, and picking her up as though she were a child, carried her tenderly.

Mr. Sward, having preceded the rest of the party to the village so hurriedly that besides barking his large nose against a sapling, he had blacked his eye upon a walnut knot, had but stopped at a rivulet long enough to bathe his injured members before awaking

the villagers and spreading wide the news of the capture.

So it was that the most of Talbotville was ranged on the village outskirts to welcome the rescued, and the rescue party, with the captured. Needless to say, the whole village stayed wide awake the rest of the night. As for the women of the gipsy band, a party detailed to bring them in reported them gone, bag and baggage. Nor were they ever seen again.

CHAPTER XL

GOD'S MYSTERIOUS WORKINGS

THE purple glow of day was beginning to fringe the banked-up clouds in the eastern sky when William Dusthand, weary but glad of heart, walked softly on the lawn bordering the gravelled walk of his home and opened the door. "Entry as though he were entering a sanctuary. At his light footstep the wee canary hopped down from her swing and sang him a morning song.

He stood before the cage, his great head thrown back, a hopeful gleam in his eyes.

"Little bird," he said, softly, as though his heart must speak its thoughts to something, "to-day we will know if heaven has given her back more than life, and, as though understanding, the little songster trilled forth a richer, fuller song.

Removing his shoes, the man crept gently across the room and passed down the dim hall to where a door stood ajar. The purple glow in the east had turned to a wide dash of crimson-golden light that stretched across the world and, entering the tiny bedroom window, kissed a wee, wan face with a black bandage across its eyes. A long time the man stood gazing down on the little face, and as he looked tears crept from his eyes down his cheeks. None but God and

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himself understood the great and holy love he felt for this child.

To-day was to tell him if little Dorothy's eyesight had been restored to her.

After a time he slipped away again. Coming back to the sitting-room, he noiselessly drew up the blinds and let the morning sunlight stream across the floor. Finally he realized that the night's strain had wearied him more than he would have thought.

His eyes were heavy and he felt weak and shaky. Mechanically he walked to the sideboard and took down a decanter. Reaching for a glass he filled it with brandy and raised it to his lips.

Then, as if upon second thought, he set the glass down untasted. His hand was trembling and a flush dyed his temples.

"Never again," he said, addressing the bird, who had eyed him silently, "never again." And, as though glad of heart for that promise, the songster sang a fuller, richer song. Stretched upon the couch, the man fell asleep to its music.

* * * * *

When he awoke the old-fashioned clock was chiming the hour of ten. Near him was seated Robert Simson, a tin box on his knees, and standing near the window were Mollie and Nan.

"Well, well," yawned Mr. Dustband, sitting up and rubbing his eyes, "getting old, I guess. Can't stand the knocking about I used to, Bob. I see you have Jonas Wilson's box. Find anything connected with the strange will?"

"I have read all the papers, as you asked me to do, Uncle Bill, and I was just about to give up hope when I came across an old diary of Mr. Wilson's."

"Ha!"

"And it gave me a partial solution to the mystery. It seems Wilson, according to his diary, was returning home through the bush one wild night, about twenty years ago, when he saw, by the aid of a flash of lightning, a man, presumably a gipsy, concealing something in a hollow log. He waited until the man had gone, then secured the package and took it to his home."

"Just like Wilson, all respect to his bones. Good night, Bob."

"Well, he goes on to say that he found the package to contain a will, with date and place of making obliterated, and some thousands of dollars in bank notes. At first he decided to destroy the will and keep the money, but his superstitious nature would not permit him to do so. In his diary he refers to the man he saw hiding the package as the instrument of the devil sent to tempt him and work him woe, and claims that he was told in a dream to place the money in a bank to the credit of one Charles Wiskins, to whom it presumably belonged. That he did so is proven by the receipt attached to the will here. It is dated, Toronto, 18—. That is all. We are still far from a proper solution, as we have yet to find out who Wiskins is."

"Thanks, Bob. I've been too worried of late to do that work myself, and I promised that chap Swift to look through the papers for him. I'll just put this in my pocket until I get a chance to think a little. I won't discuss the matter further to-day, because I don't want to because to-day we are to know—"

Simson reached for his big hand and pressed it.

"Perhaps you would rather be alone," he commenced, glancing up at the dark-haired girl standing by the window, but the other gripped his arm.

"No, no. It will not be a shock to us, Bob, if she cannot see," he whispered. "It will only be another of God's great blessings to us if she can. Ah, my darling!"

He had risen and advanced with open arms to meet the little girl, who was entering the room with Miss Dustband.

"Dorothy, love," he whispered, lifting her as though she were a baby.

"Uncle Bill, you bad boy," she smiled, kissing his whiskered face. "You ran away from home last night."

He carried her gently to a great easy chair and placed her thereon tenderly.

"There you are," he cried, "just like a queen upon her throne. Now, you tell Bob all about Tabby's new kittens, and I'll be back in a minute."

He left her talking excitedly to the school-master, and passed across the room to where the girls stood.

"Nan, girl," he said, his voice shaking, "will you do it? I can't."

Nan went over and, kneeling beside Dorothy's chair, took the girl's hands in hers.

"Oh, Nan," cried Dorothy, gleefully, "I am going to give you one of Tabby's kitties."

"Are you, love? How nice that will be! You are feeling very much better every day, aren't you, Dorothy?"

"Oh, yes, only this old bandage makes my head feel so funny. Nan, I wish it were off."

Nan's face was white, and she kept her golden head bowed a long time before she answered.

"Dorothy," she said at last, softly, "the doctors say it can be taken off to-day. Shall I remove it now, dear?"

"Oh, please do."

Silently Mollie drew the blinds down and closed the curtains, as Nan's white hands trembling sought the fastenings of the bandage, while in that darkened room a big man stood helplessly waiting and hoping.

At last Nan's voice broke the silence, chokingly.

"There, dear, do you feel better now?"

"Oh, ever and ever so much," answered the child.

"Why—why—"

"Dorothy," cried Dustband, running forward and kneeling beside her, "what is it, Dorothy?"

"I—I cannot tell," she answered, with a sob, "unless it be sight; but oh, Uncle Bill, how am I to know?"

Mollie parted the curtains and the light flooded the room.

"Does the light hurt you, love?" he asked, huskily.

"A little," she answered. Her big blue eyes were wide with a new wonder, and her hands strayed through his tangled hair.

At last the white lids fluttered down, and with a sigh the girl whispered:

"Uncle Bill, dear Uncle Bill, God has answered all our prayers. I can see. Let me see all your faces—yours, Nan and Mollie, and aunty's and Mr. Simson's."

then put the bandage back again, please. I cannot stand so much joy, so much joy at one time."

They came over and knelt together beside her.

"Just like my pictures," she murmured, looking down. "Nan and Mollie, just as I pictured them; aunty and uncle, just the same. Oh," she broke off, "think of all the joy that will be mine. I will see Gaff and Buz and Bruno, and all my loves."

The man holding her felt her tremble. Gently he placed the bandage back across her eyes.

"To-morrow we will keep it off longer," he said, huskily, "and the next day longer still, and so on until we can leave it off altogether."

And with her face nestling against his, he carried her from the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE MATE OF THE "AZOV."

"BENJAMIN, if you will oblige me by slipping into our domicile and fetching out my glasses, I will focus the same on yonder schooner, which seems about to heave to."

Mr. Sward, at all times obedient to the requests of his much-admired partner, did as he was requested with as much alacrity as his bruised personage would allow.

"Yes, I am right. It is as I conjectured. She is dropping anchor."

Mr. Sward tenderly patted the bandage on his right eye, and cast its uninjured mate across the water.

"Comin' in fer supplies, no doubt, Jack?"

"I think you are correct in your surmise, Benjamin. We have, I believe, some six dozen or so of smoked herring at our disposal, in case they should wish any."

"We have."

"Ahem! Exactly. I believe what we have on supply have been already sold. I might remark, Benjamin, that should yonder mariners demand our famous smoked herring, we should, in justice to ourselves and former purchasers, advance the price materially."

"But th' fish ain't sold, Jack, not as yet."

Mr. Shipley lowered his glasses and looked at his partner reproachfully.

"You haven't got a good head for business, Benjamin," he said, with regret in his tones. "No wonder the gipsies nearly finished you."

"They're comin' in 'ith th' yawl. They're headin' this way," said Sward, ignoring his friend's satire.

"That being the case, we had best advance to the beach to receive our visitors."

In a brief time the yawl was beached, and a short, heavy-set man, with iron-gray hair and moustache, climbed out and shook hands with the fishermen.

"Good morning, gents, glad to see you, and glad to feel the touch of earth beneath my feet again. My name's Jones. Mate of the *Azov*, lying out yonder," he explained. "We've just laid to to run . . . some necessaries. Isn't there a place called Talbotville somewhere about opposite here?"

"One mile and a half, straight north, as the crow flies," answered Mr. Shipley.

"I thought so. Bring up the baskets, Jim, and we'll get along."

"You never touched our port before, I presume," said Mr. Shipley. "Our harbor is not in good repair now. We used to have quite a number of ships tie up at our dock."

"Water not deep enough. Nothing to come in for," replied the mate. "By the way, come to think of it, I was here once before—at least, I was out there."

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the schooner.

"I was sailing on the old *Ella Croft*—two-stick craft, and as cranky a she-bear as I ever piloted. We had on board a man and a woman—seems to me there was a baby, too, but I can't just remember. I do

remember the woman, though. She was the handsomest woman I have ever seen. Tall and straight as a ramrod. Told us she was reared on the prairie. She'd talk north-west by the hour, and shoot—I have seen her pick a skimming swallow off with a 32-caliber revolver twice out of three times. She was dressed as an East India princess, and every bit as regal. Thinking she was a southerner. I don't remember what the man was like, except most of us thought him a bit off his mind at times. He had red hair and was tall and slight. You could tell by the way his eyes followed his wife that he loved the very planks she walked on. That's about all I can remember about him, except his name, which was Wiskins.

"Funny thing about those people," resumed the mate, after lighting his pipe, "They came aboard just as we were slipping our moorings at Detroit. We were loaded with wheat for Buffalo. We weren't supposed to carry passengers, but the man pleaded to be taken aboard. Offered the captain \$500 if he'd take them on. No, sir, the Cap wouldn't do it, until—"

The speaker chuckled and gave his trousers a hitch.

"Until the woman spoke up; then it was all off with the Cap's objections."

"He took them, then?" asked Mr. Shipley.

"Well, it wasn't ruleable, but he did. Yes, he took them aboard. And I remember now there was a baby, a boy, a strong, kicking little beggar with hair red like his daddy's. I held him while his mother was climbing up."

"You don't say!" commented Mr. Sward, wonderingly.

The mate nodded.

"Yep, and they proved a Jonah for us, too. We had some dirty weather that trip. Second day out, just as we were almost opposite here, a sou'easter struck us and nearly made a skein of twins out of our canvas. We had to run the tub with only a handkerchief to her nose until the seas got too heavy; then we threw our gripper and let her stern the waves. We were about three miles from this spot, I should reckon. It was three o'clock in the morning, and I was standing watch. We were afraid to try and make harbor on account of shoals. You see, we were freighted pretty heavy. I say, I was on deck, in the rain, and, gentlemen, it was raining, too. The light on that old pier gleamed dimly through the heavy darkness. Somebody touched me on the arm, and I turned. There stood our passengers. The man had a couple of travelling bags in his hands. The woman carried the baby.

"'We want to be put ashore,' said the man.

"I was almost too surprised to speak. Put ashore in that weather! I thought the man had gone crazy.

"'I guess you're joking,' says I.

"'No,' said the woman, speaking up, 'We have got to go ashore.'

"'You can't do it,' I cried. 'We can't make the pier, and no dinghy could live in those waves.'

"'Well, you needn't try it,' replied Wiskins. 'You've got an extra dinghy bound astern. Sell it to me. We will take all chances.'

"'I am not the captain,' I explained. 'You'll have to see him.'

"'We did see him,' said the woman. 'He won't listen to us, and so you must help us.'

"That nettled me a little. 'See here,' I shouted 'you can't go. That's all there is to it.'

"Well, the next thing I knew I was on my back on the deck, and that sinewy little beggar's hand was clinched on my wind-pipe. I never thought a little man had so much power. He was scienced, too. Between them, they got me, all right. The woman helped him. She was almost as strong as a man. She laid her baby down, and helped him gag and bind me.

"After they had the job completed to their satisfaction, the man told me some things.

" 'My man,' says he, 'I had to do this. It is a matter of great moment to us that we reach a certain place before the 20th of the month. I understand enough about the weather to know that this storm will not abate in time for us to realize our calculations. There's only one way. That is to take a chance. I know this shore. Talbotville lies four miles north of here. We will try and make shore in the extra dinghy, and from the village we will reach the railway by horse. We are taking our own chance. I will pay you well for the boat, and will leave it on shore so that you may go after it when the weather clears sufficiently. If we are capsized, it will likely go ashore, anyway.'

"He reached down and put a package in my trousers' pocket. 'That's for the boat,' he explained. Then he put another package in my other pocket. 'There's \$300 in that roll,' he said, 'it's for yourself. We appreciate your desire to keep us from danger but we've got to take the risk.' "

The mate stopped to re-light his pipe, then resumed.

"They got away all right. The chap must have understood sailing, for he launched the dinghy in the

running sea and shipped her cargo without a spill. I don't know how far they got. They wouldn't get very far in that sea, I tell you.

"Two hours after they were gone the man coming to relieve me cut me from my moorings. We couldn't do anything but wonder why the poor people wanted to drown themselves. The captain felt pretty badly worked up over it, said he always knew the chap was lunny, but we had to keep our own counsel. Well, there's not a doubt but what they were all three drowned. I don't think their bodies were ever recovered, for I watched the papers, and there was no account of it."

The mate sighed, and drew his hand through his iron-gray hair. Mr. Sward started to speak, but Mr. Shipley anticipated him with a question.

"Ahem! Did you, then, seek for the dinghy after the weather had cleared, sir?"

"Well, now, the weather didn't clear. That's the worst of it. At daylight next morning the wind veered and blew a gale from the west. We switched with it and dragged anchor straight toward Cleveland for about six miles. Then we got our grapples in and ran before the wind. We were miles off our course when the weather cleared. No, we didn't look for the dinghy. We had too much else to do."

By this time Mr. Sward was almost exploding to speak. Only Mr. Shipley's controlling glances could hold him in check, and he was being effectively held.

Gravely Mr. Shipley produced his short, well-colored clay pipe. Gravely he filled it; gravely he lit it. Then, with an air of one who knows sad tidings

which he would break gently, he pointed to the decayed hull of *The Blinker*.

"Come!" he invited.

They walked over to the old boat, lying high beneath the shelter of the bank.

"Sir, do you recognize her?" asked Mr. Shipley, addressing the mate, and removing his coal-tarred hat with befitting awe. "We found her on the beach her bottom up nearly twelve years ago."

"Yes, I know her," said the mate, after a time. "That's the dinghy. I had always hoped, for the woman's, for the baby's sake, that—"

He ceased speaking abruptly and commenced whistle.

"Come, Jim," he cried, at length, "We'd best be moving. By the way, you look as though you had mixed things some," he cried, addressing Sward.

Mr. Sward patted his bandage and looked at Mr. Shipley.

"My partner participated in the capture of some noted outlaws last night," the latter explained.

"Indeed."

"Gipsies," corrected Mr. Sward.

"Gipsy outlaws we will call them, Benjamin."

"And they put up a fight, eh?"

"I believe so, sir—I believe so. At any rate, they were all captured, and are now being held for trial at our court-house. You will be allowed to see them, sir."

"Perhaps I'll take a look, then. See you later, gents. Come on Jimmie."

And the mate and his companion turned toward the road leading to the village.

Mr. Shipley sighed.

"A tragedy, Benjamin, about which we have known nothing. Verily, the ways of Providence are passing strange, Benjamin."

"Poor people, poor man, poor woman, poor baby!" said sympathetic Sward.

"Come. We will prepare our array of smoked herring, Benjamin, and await the return of the officer from yon good ship, the *Azov*."

CHAPTER XLII.

A FORGOTTEN NAME.

"How's she gettin' along, Clara?"

Mrs. Diggs tip-toed softly across the little parlour and closed the door gently behind her.

"She's asleep, poor dear," she answered.

Simon tongued his under lip thoughtfully.

"She's been a brave woman, Clara, else she couldn't have stood what she has."

"It just must have been awful for her," said the sympathetic woman. "Think of it, Simon. Nearly twelve years of such a life. It's a wonder she isn't crazy."

"She's eddicated, too, ain't she?"

"Yes, and refined. She's a lady born, Simon."

Mr. Diggs smoothed his long strand of hair carefully across his forehead.

"Does she remember everythin' now, Clara?" he asked, uneasily.

"Well, some things she does, and clearly. She remembers coming ashore in a rowboat one awful winter night, nearly twelve years ago. Her husband and baby were with her. They expected they would all be drowned, but Providence was kind to them and guided them safely. She remembers that they were set upon by a band of robbers on the way from the beach to the village, and when her husband resist-

they struck him down. It might be that they did not intend to kill him, Simon, but they did."

Mrs. Diggs wiped her already red eyes on her apron and her good man snorted loudly.

"They'll pay fer it all, now," he prophesied.

"She says that when they struck her husband down she attempted to defend herself, but they beat her into insensibility."

Mr. Diggs nodded, and leaned over that he might hear more distinctly.

"How long ago is it since she remembered all this?" he asked.

"Only recently, I believe. For years she remembered nothing of her past, due, no doubt, to the blows she received on that awful night."

"And now?"

"She remembers much, but not all. Doctor Ashworth says her memory will return fully in time."

"She knows who Gaffy is, Clara?"

"Ah, yes," answered his wife, smiling, "she knows. She won't let the boy out of her sight."

"And the boy?"

"Why, he is as happy as a king, Simon. He calls her 'mammie,' and waits on her, hand and foot. Oh, isn't it all wonderful, Simon dear?"

Diggs nodded his head so hard that his scalp-lock got loose and wandered a little down his left shoulder.

"I'm glad fer it all," he said, simply.

"She says her husband's parents were very wealthy, wherever they are, Simon."

"Eh? What's that? Then she'll be a rich woman. I'm glad fer her sake an' Gaff's. What's her real name, Clara?"

"Ah, that is one of the blanks in her memory," answered his wife. "She cannot remember it."

"Well, by gum," mused Mr. Diggs, tonguing his lip excitedly. "Isn't that too bad, now?"

Mrs. Diggs sighed.

"Well, I tell you what she kin do," he cried, light dawning upon him, "she kin advertise, askin' fer her name, an' have it put in th' foreign papers, as well as th' ones o' this country. Somebody'll sure know what it is, Clara."

"How can anybody possibly know her name, Simon, when she herself has forgotten it?"

Mr. Diggs stared at his wife blankly.

"By ginger!" he exclaimed, bringing back his truant scalp-lock with a jerk. "That bein' th' case, Clara, we're stuck, I guess."

"If she only knew her name and where her home was, it would all be simple to smooth out," said Mrs. Diggs.

There was much rapping on the bar downstairs, but the landlord of the Commercial Hotel paid not the slightest attention to it. He had other and more important matters in hand.

"The man they killed,—he must have had valuables on him, eh?" he asked.

"Some thirty thousand dollars in bank bills and papers of value, she tells me," answered his wife.

"Can she get th' money an' papers back, d'ye think?"

"I'm afraid not. She says the captain of the gang swears that they were re-stolen from where he had concealed them."

Diggs nodded and wet his lips. He wanted to ask

another question, but it cost him a great effort to even think of it.

Mrs. Diggs, understanding, laid her hand sympathetically on his arm.

"What is it, Simon?" she asked, gently.

"I'd like if you'd find out fer us, Clara, if she knows where it was they put her husband?" he jerked out.

"There is never an affliction without some blessing, Simon dear," she answered. "Thank God, that is another thing she cannot remember."

"I'm glad fer thet, 'cause we've jest this mornin' dragged th' pond an' found—"

Mr. Diggs swallowed hard and his wife nodded.

"Yes, Simon. And the men you took last night?"

"Still tied, an' waitin' in' the lock-up t' be taken t' Bridgetown on th' noon stage."

"How about the man Pete?"

"Well, now, we can't find Pete nowheres," answered her husband, evasively. "Pete has gone, Clara."

"I'm glad of that. I believe there is some good in him, after all, from what the woman has told me."

"You might jest mention t' her, casual like, thet he got away, Clara."

"I will. But how will he ever get along without money, Simon?"

Mr. Diggs fidgeted uneasily.

"I guess maybe he had enough for his needs when he left, more'n enough, maybe," he answered, smiling foolishly, as he moved toward the door.

Mrs. Diggs ran after him and caught his old, wrinkled face between her hands. Then she kissed him squarely on the tip of his big nose.

"You old dear, you!" she cried. "You can't fool

me very much. You and the rest of them down there gave him some money and told him to go. Am I right?"

"I'm not sayin' nuthin', fer I'm too deaf t' hear word you say," answered Simon, stepping out into the hall.

"Couple of sailors off schooner *Azov* down here cried a voice from below. "And they want to see you pretty bad. Better come down, Simon."

"Comin'," called Mr. Diggs. "Comin' right now."

CHAPTER XLIII.

FROM OUT THE DEAD PAST.

"THIS is Mr. Jones, of the schooner *Azov*, Simon," said Mr. Goosecall.

"Glad t' meet you, sir," said Mr. Diggs, shaking hands with the sailor. "I didn't jest catch th' name, Ed?"

"Jones," shouted Goosecall. "Jones o' th' *Azov*."

"Jones," repeated Mr. Diggs. "I know some Joneses down in Palmirey. Have you any relations in Palmirey, Mr. Azov?"

"He's as deaf as an adder sometimes, sir," whispered Mr. Goosecall to the visitor. "He's not the whole boat, Simon; he's th' mate off her. His name is *Jones*."

"Well, you needn' take my head off 'bout it. I kin hear you," replied Mr. Diggs, with dignity.

"I don't think I have any relatives in the place you name, Mr. Diggs," said Mr. Jones, smiling.

"There's a hoss doctor in Bridgetown by th' name o' Jones," remarked Mr. Fields, looking hard at the mate.

"No relation," asserted Mr. Jones, shaking his head.

"Oh, there's lots and lots of Joneses," laughed Mr. Malcolm. "Lots and lots of Joneses. For that matter, our own blacksmith is a Jones, bedad!"

"Yes, but he isn't much o' anythin' more," replied

Mr. Fields. "When you say he's a Jones an' a blacksmith, you've said it all. Hello! Here's Dick. What's th' news, lad?"

"Nuthin' 'cept we found the man Henry, all right," answered Dick, "an' he's told us where th' stolen goods is hid. He says everythin' they took is there. We got all th' stolen money back from th' Cap'n fellow too."

"Now, we're glad t' hear thet, Dick. Where you put th' man Henry? Along 'ith th' others, s'pose?"

Dick nodded.

"I must tell you 'bout las' night," said Mr. Diggs, folding his arms on the bar and leaning over toward Mr. Jones. "Thar's been a band o' cut-throat gipsy campin' out here in th' woods, an'—"

"Yes, yes, I've heard all about it," interrupted Mr. Jones. "The boys have told me the whole story."

"Yes, it is," said Mr. Diggs. "It's more'n a story in fact, it's a romance. Now, there was a woman in this band o' gipsies, an'—"

"You'll have t' yell at him t' make him understand," laughed Mr. Goosecall, nudging the mate's elbow.

Mr. Jones laid his hands on Mr. Diggs' narrow shoulders.

"Listen," he said. "I have already heard the story of the gipsies and their capture."

"An' th' woman?"

"Yes, also the story of the woman and the boy George. I've heard the whole story, Mr. Diggs, and agree with you that it is a romance."

"Somebody mus' have told you 'bout it," sighed Mr. Diggs, wiping a glass on his shirt sleeve.

"Yes, the boys here told me before you came down."

"Well, by gum!" sighed Mr. Diggs, putting his hands in his pockets. "I'd a liked fust rate t' have told you 'bout it myself. But did they show you th' gipsies?" he asked, his wrinkled face brightening.

"Yes."

"Well, by gosh!" There was an expression of real vexation on Mr. Diggs' countenance. "They showed you th' gipsies, too, eh? Well, by gosh!"

"Simon likes t' be th' one t' show our visitors th' things wuth seein'," explained Mr. Goosecall, in an aside. "Simon is usually th' reception committee an' guide o' Talbotville."

Suddenly Mr. Diggs gave his long strand of hair a jerk and rolled down his shirt sleeves.

"Come this way, sir," he invited, stepping from behind the bar, and beckoning to Mr. Jones.

"Simon has an idear. See thet smile o' his," remarked Mr. Fields.

The mate laughed and joined Mr. Diggs in the hall.

"I reckon they haven't showed you everythin' yet, mister," chuckled the landlord, delightedly, drawing Mr. Jones a pace or two down the hall, out of earshot of the others. "You haven't seen *her*, yet."

"No, I haven't," agreed Mr. Jones, consulting his watch, and shuffling uncomfortably. "And, much as I would like to, I really do not believe I have time to take that pleasure. You see, Mr. Diggs, I have one of the deck-hands with me, and he is roaming wild somewhere about the village. I must find him and get back to the boat. We're a day behind now."

"It'll only take a minute," cried Simon, leading the

way upstairs. "You don't often get a chance t' see a beautiful woman what has been an' is still a real live hero-ine, sir. Come on."

Mr. Diggs smoothed down his hair, and winked slyly at Mr. Jones, who, with a sigh, resigned himself and followed the landlord.

In response to Mr. Diggs's rather timid knock, the parlor door was opened by his wife, who gracefully acknowledged the introduction to Mr. Jones, and invited the visitors inside.

The woman, Di, stood before the wide window, her tall, graceful form silhouetted against the misty autumn sunlight. She was dressed in a simple gown of black that fitted her perfect figure like a glove. Her heavy hair was plaited on the top of her shapely head, its dead blackness contrasting strongly with the white linen collar at her throat.

She turned as the men entered, and the sailor was quick to note the unutterable longing in her glorious eyes. Where had he seen that face before? he asked himself.

Mrs. Diggs came over and placed an arm about the woman's waist.

"This gentleman is Mr. Jones, my dear," she said. "a visitor to our village, who, hearing the story of your captivity, wished, no doubt, to behold the woman who has been so strong and brave."

Mr. Jones came forward and took the hand the woman extended.

"It is indeed a pleasure to behold one who has been so brave in adversity," he said, simply.

"God is good," said the woman. "He has delivered me and given me back my baby. So that no

the heavy clouds are almost dispersed, and the gold is showing through them. There is only one shadow remaining, and, oh, it will not be dispelled. I have thought and thought until my poor brain is in a turmoil. But I must keep on thinking and thinking until I remember."

"There is still one sorrow that rests with you, then?" asked the sailor, gently.

"Yes. It is not anything that has to do with—with the past," she murmured, her head sinking. "I have fought that down. No, it is something that has to do with the present. My memory has not fully recovered its old-time power. I cannot remember my name."

"And if you knew—then?" he asked, his brown cheeks flushing.

"Oh, then, think what it would mean. See, I have life and health and my baby. He is my baby still, you know, for there is a dark blank of twelve years in my life, so that I must take up its thread where it snapped. I have life and health and my baby, and in this the fulness of joy is almost complete. Its full completeness can only become mine when my identity becomes known, and we cannot tell how that may be brought about."

"Listen," said the sailor. "If someone should come to you and tell you who you are, give you your name, tell me, would the shock, after what you have already undergone, be too much for you to stand, think you?"

"No, no. That would so complete my happiness that I would be the stronger. Oh, would someone might tell me!"

"Then I will tell you You are Mrs. Charles Wiskins, of Buffalo."

For a moment she stared at him, her great eyes wide with wonder. Swiftly the expression gave place to one of intelligence, and the blood which had fled from her cheeks at the name he spoke surged back in a great tide.

"You are right," she said. "I remember now. I am Mrs. Charles Wiskins, of Buffalo. God must have sent you to me. I cannot attempt to thank you for what you have done—mere words cannot do that. But," she added, taking his hand in hers, "if our deeds here are measured thus, if what unhappiness we inflict on loved ones is offset in the eyes of our Creator by the happiness we may give to others, we will have a glorious balance on the books of our recording angel now for what you have given me."

Then, gazing intently upon him, the woman asked:

"Will you tell me how it is you know me?"

"Yes," he answered, "I will. Once, years ago, you were a passenger on a freight schooner plying between Detroit and Buffalo. I learned your name then. You were sailing on the ship at the time."

"Did you? Oh, how fortunate for me that it happened here to-day!" cried the woman, her eyes shining with tears. "I remember everything now, and, Mr. Jones, if you will permit me, I will tell you why we took such a terrible chance on that wild night nearly twelve years ago."

CHAPTER XLIV.

A STORY.

SITTING on the sofa, her arm about Mrs. Diggs' waist, Mrs. Wiskins told her story.

"It is my wish, dear friends," she said, "that you should learn how it was I, with my husband, tempted Providence by taking that wild ride in the schooner's dinghy on that awful and eventful night, of which you already know. But also I would have you learn that which I trust will aid in dispelling the mists from some things about which your minds cannot be clear. I know that my conduct in remaining with a band of lawless people, knowing what I did, when returning memory thrust the horrible truth upon me, seems strange and unnatural to you. And still, I believe, after I have told my story, you will understand, and in your great hearts feel that I was justified in playing the part I did.

"To do so I must commence with my girlhood and briefly describe my early life. It was spent on God's free, wide play-ground, the prairie. There I roamed and rode and had my being. My father was a successful rancher, my mother I cannot remember. Over the wide plain, up the steep mountain-side, or through the wild forest I roamed at will and learned the lessons that Nature insists on teaching all her children. Well for me that I had learned all this before, else think you I would have been able to withstand the hardships that have been mine and command the respect of even lawless cut-throats. Where I was reared it was customary for everybody to go armed. I have never departed from the custom, and only once in

twelve years with the robber band did I find it necessary to show them that I knew how to shoot. One of the captives down there carries the ball from my derringer in his shoulder now.

"I tell you this so that you may know that my trials have perhaps not been as great as you might imagine.

"Six months of the year I attended college, and received a liberal education there. When I was nineteen years old Mr. Wiskins came west in search of health. I met him, and we were married in less than a year after. Our home was in Buffalo, where my husband conducted a very successful banking and brokerage business. His people did not like me. They considered his a *mésalliance*, and they even accused me of marrying him for his wealth. We cared very little for what they thought; we were happy and contented in each other's company. Our summers we spent on the plain, where we rode and shot and slept in the air.

"My husband had a younger brother named Edward, of whom he was very fond. From the first time I saw Edward Wiskins I mistrusted him—I know not why, unless it be intuition, for, as it afterward transpired, he was my husband's deadly enemy. Owing to his strong attachment to Edward, my husband had drawn up his will leaving the bulk of his fortune, in case of his death, to the brother. This I learned when one day Mr. Wiskins placed in my hand two legal-looking documents, and explained to me what they were. The one was the will, made before his marriage, the will in favor of his brother Edward. The other was a newly-drawn will, and provided that in case of his death his fortune should be left to me and the dear child that had lately come to bless us.

"'It is a little hard on poor Edward,' he had laughed, as he handed the documents to me. 'But I have stipulated in the new will that he be left \$10,000. I will place both documents in your keeping. Guard the late one well, as it has no duplicate.'

"'And the other?' I asked.

"'Is, according to law, worthless. The late will always stands.'"

She ceased speaking for a time, and let her gaze wander through the window across the street.

"I am satisfied that Edward Wiskins never knew there was a new will," she resumed, at length. "It was the diabolical plot he concocted to prevent the making of one that has caused all this misery.

"Owing to the heavy strain caused by business speculations, my husband's health, never the best, began to fail him once more. Edward took advantage of this, as was afterwards ascertained, to circulate the report that his brother was thought to be going insane. One night he visited my husband and left our home at a late hour. Mr. Wiskins came to me after his brother had gone and told me that Edward wished him to go to Detroit to value certain real estate he was interested in purchasing. I asked to be allowed to accompany him, and he consented. Before leaving, I slipped the new will into the package containing my husband's papers, feeling that I would rather keep it in our possession until I could deposit it safely. The former will I left behind me. It is clear that Edward Wiskins never for a moment surmised that I would accompany my husband, as he had previously made all his business trips alone. However, I and my baby came to Detroit with Mr. Wiskins. On the way I told him my suspicions, and

after much coaxing induced him to promise to do so with care. Unbeknown to him, I wired ahead asking the secret service at Detroit for their assistance. I cannot tell why I did this, something within me counselled the action, but it was well I did so, for the plot of Edward Wiskins was discovered. His object was to place my husband in the hands of a tool who pretended to conduct a private mad-house in Detroit. That plot being successful, well he knew that my brother would soon succumb to the brutal treatment he would receive, and that the fortune would revert to him.

"We forced his tool to telegraph Edward that my husband was safely imprisoned, and it was to frustrate his further plans that we decided to return to Buffalo by boat, instead of rail, as he had spies abroad. My husband had in hand a commercial venture involving nearly half a million of dollars. It was imperative that he be in Buffalo on a certain date. As the storm in consequence of the storm, could not possibly materialize in the appointed time, my husband determined to risk going ashore in the yawl and taking the Michigan Central to Buffalo. I pleaded with him, but to no avail. I will not say that I considered him always of a rational mind, and for my baby's sake I did not like to risk the wild waves. But risk it we did, and we reached shore safely, though how I never knew.

"The rest of my story you, dear friends, already know. But you cannot understand what I have suffered since memory has returned to me, with the awful tragedy of that wild night still vivid in my mind, to be forced to remain with those fiends who had robbed me of so much. Why did I not flee from them, you ask? Well, there was a reason. Even after I learned that

my boy was alive and near me. I knew my part was not yet played. Not that I suffered physically. Mine was the hardihood of the plain. The whispering trees and the wide open sky I was used to, and that was why I lived the wandering life naturally for twelve long years, with the past a blank."

Again she looked out of the window. Her hearers waited breathlessly for her next words.

"On that night my husband's last will and bank-notes aggregating some \$30,000 were stolen. It was that I might secure the will, that, knowing all, I waited on. I thought to do this by strategy, for, had I appealed to the law, I felt that those men would still outwit me."

She sighed deeply.

"As it is, they have done so. The captain of the gang, who stole and hid the package, swears that it was in turn re-stolen; that when he returned to secure it, he found it gone."

She ceased speaking and leaned her head on Mrs. Diggs's shoulder.

"Then, after all—" commenced the elder woman.

"Yes, after all, I am penniless, for, according to the only remaining and original will, Edward Wiskins has inherited my husband's fortune. But," she cried, springing up, a glad smile on her face, "I have something else, thank God. I have life, and friends, and my child. Oh, that is so much, so much!"

"And you have more than that, madam," spoke a heavy voice at the door. "You have the last will and testament of Charles Wiskins."

There, smiling a big, joyful smile, stood William Dustband, waving in his hand a legal-looking, weather-stained document.

CHAPTER XLV.

"TWO GOOD NEWSES."

DICK DASHMORE sat on a stump, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. A double-barrelled muzzle-loading shotgun leaned against the tree beside him.

At his feet crouched Fan, the setter. Occasionally she turned her quick eyes to his face, as though wondering what it was made him so silent. For long minutes Dick had sat there thinking, thinking, and never speaking a word, as was his wont, to the old dog.

But Dick's thoughts were not on shooting this October morning. He was thinking of a little home that had been his and Gaffy's for a long time. Thinking of the loneliness of it when Gaffy went away to the big city. He wondered how he would get along without Gaffy, without Gaffy's voice, without Gaffy's whistle. No one to talk to when the long shadow came swooping down, and it was night; no one to share the morning, the noon-day and the evening meal with.

And as he thought these thoughts, a lump came in his throat and tears streamed down his cheeks.

Quail whistled in the yellow-tops to the right of him, but he paid no heed. He had not come out to shoot, but to get away from his thoughts; and strange it seemed to him, here in this spot, beautiful and

lonely, the thoughts that crowded themselves upon him were sadder even than before.

The old dog sat up and laid her head on his knee. He stroked her silky ears tenderly.

"Good ol' gal," he said. "Good ol' Fan."

They looked into each other's eyes for a time, then Dick shook his head.

"No use, gal," he said, his voice husky. "You an' th' pups 'll have t' go along o' him. You see, Fan, Gaff won't have me, ner Buz, ner th' woods, ner th' crick; Gaff won't have nuthin' arter he goes but *her*. I know she's a whole lot, Fan, but Gaffy's sure t' miss all th' things he's leavin' behind. So you must go along of him, and look arter him some. An' Fan, you'll have t' play 'ith him, an' gambol 'ith him, an' be jest th' same 'ith him as you've allers been. I don't s'pose that he'll have woods like these, ner yaller tops like these, an' thar's no game birds thar, likely, fer you t' hunt; but I knows you jest love Gaffy enough t' make him believe you don't care, don't you, gal?"

The dog whined and put her forepaws on his knees.

"Thar, don't you go kissin' me good-bye yet, Fan. We been't parted yet, but it won't be long now, I guess."

Just here Fan gave a joyful bark, and a pair of warty hands were placed over Dick's eyes.

"Can't guess who 'tis!" cried a voice.

"Jest as though I wouldn't know them warts anywheres," laughed Dick, wiping his face on his sleeve.

"An' if thar been't Buz too, an' you've both brought your guns!"

"Sure, Dick, we've brought 'em. We've gotter shoot *her* a mess o' quail."

"*Her*?"

"He means his mammie," explained Buz, a comical grin on his face. "An', oh Dick, we've got some o' th' best news fer you."

"Two of 'em," corrected Gaff.

"Yes, two good newses, Dick. First one is, little—"

"Here now, not quite so fast, Buz!" cried Gaff.

"I wanter tell Dick that news myself."

"Well, let's draw cuts. Er no, you kin tell him one good news an' I'll tell him t'other good news, mine first."

"Oh, Dick, little Dorothy kin see!"

"No!" cried Dick, jumping up.

"Sure as gospel, Dick, she kin," asserted Gaff.

"When? How?" asked Dick, bewildered.

"Why, that big doctor from Detroit did it—least ways, th' disease did it, so he says, only he helped some."

"She kin really see, then?" said Dick. "I kin hardly believe it."

"Nobody knowed it until 'bout two hours ago," cried Gaff, "an' th' whole town's jest wild. Everybody has been down t' see her 'cept you, an' as soon as we get some birds you mus' go, too."

"She—she ain't wantin' t' see me very much likely," said Dick, looking away.

"Ain't she, though? Well, now, you're one o' th' fust ones she asked t' see," cried Buz.

"Dear leetle gal," said Dick. "It is sure good news you brought, boys. It is sure good news."

"Now fer mine!" cried Gaff.

He came around, and stood right in front of Dick, so he might see his face.

"Dick," he said, "you're sorry I'm goin' t' leave you, ain't you?"

"Well, boy, you know I be; still, I'm glad fer your sake," answered Dick, smiling bravely.

"An' you'll ass me some when I go, won't you, Dick?"

"Maybe a leetle at fust, Gaffy, maybe some at fust, I will. But I'll keep thinkin' o' your grand home an' th' eddication you're gettin', an' that'll balance up th' lonesomeness some, you see."

"Well, you remember me tellin' mammie that I jest couldn't leave you, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, Gaffy."

"Do you remember what she said? She said, 'Well, you'll never need to.' That's what she said, an' I'm not goin' t', either. You're comin' 'ith us, Dick."

"Me!" said Dick, weakly. "Me goin' 'ith you?"

"Dick," said Gaff, placing his arm about the man's neck, "I'd be a mean beggar t' leave you. More'n that, I jest couldn' do it on account o' likin' you so much. You've been my daddie an' mammie, my whole family, ever since th' gipsies lef' me 'ith you, an' 'ith th' exception o' th' mammie, you're goin' t' be all that still."

"I'd like so much t' go, Gaffy, you knows it. Only I can't afford it."

"Well, now, that's th' fun o' it. Mammie's rich, real rich. She's wuth thousands an' thousands o' dollars, Dick, so th' lawyer telegraphed her, an' she claims as she owes you more'n money kin ever repay."

"Them's her very words," confirmed Buz.

"An' she says if you'll come an' stay 'ith us in th' city durin' th' winters, we'll all come back here fer th' summers an' th' shootin' seasons."

"Did she?" asked Dick, eagerly. "Did she, really?"

"Sure she did!" cried both the boys.

"An' Dick," cried Gaff, "she wants Buz t' go along, too, an' he's goin', ain't you, Buz?"

"Yep, I'm goin', too," said Buz, "an' oh, we'll all be there. You, Dick, and Gaff, an' me an' sumbody else—guess who?"

"Will it be little Dorothy?" asked Dick.

"Sure. You guessed it. Little Dorothy—not little blind Dorothy no more now, but little Dorothy."

"Well, well," said Dick, wiping his eyes again. "I s'pose she's goin' t' th' city t' be eddicated, too."

"Yep, an' Aunty Dustband an' Mr. Dustband's goin' with her. She's been sendin' tellygrams an' receivin' tellygrams all day. She leaves fer Buffalo to-morrer mornin'."

"Say, can't a whole lot happen in two days' time?" said Buz.

"It kin that, boys, it kin that," replied Dick. "Well, well!" he added, "I'm right glad everything is like it is. Now, you boys go shoot your mammi some quail. I'm goin' t' see little Dorothy, God bless her."

CHAPTER XLVI.

ASHES OF MAPLE LEAVES.

It was late autumn now, and the leaves lay thick upon the path along which Nan Malcolm and Mollie Gray walked at the close of a short day.

Indian summer, with her gold and mist, had come and gone. Heavy gray clouds banked the sky, save away to westward. There a dash of crimson marked the good-bye kiss of day.

"Hearts, like the yellow leaves of Autumn,
Grow brighter in the Dawn of Chill;
Throw us a tender smile of beauty,
Then flutter earthward and lie still."

Nan spoke the words softly, and threw her arm about her friend's waist.

"I'm blue, Mollie," she said. "I'm awfully blue."

"I know you are, dear," Mollie replied, gently.

"Blue because you're going away again to-morrow. Blue because the whole world seems so gray and cold. Mollie, Mollie, what is the matter with me?"

Her friend patted the girl's hand softly. She did not attempt to answer Nan's question. At length, after a long silence, she spoke.

"Nan, Mr. Simson has proposed to me—and I have accepted."

"Oh, you darling!" cried Nan. "Why—why didn't you tell me before?"

"I—I simply couldn't, at least while it was daylight so I waited until now. Are you glad, Nan?"

"So glad, dear heart," answered Nan, "so glad, your sake and for his."

"He—he said you would be glad, Nan."

"And he is right, Mollie," said the other girl, kissing tenderly the dark, wistful face.

"And Nan, I'm to come back soon and we're going to live right here in Talbotville; there, now," said Mollie, patting her friend's cheek, lovingly. "Do those that take any of the blues away, dear?" she asked. "And, oh, Nan, won't it be nice for us to be so near one another all the time?"

"So nice," answered Nan.

"I might as well tell you everything, Nan," said Mollie, slowly. "It's a secret though, so remember you must not tell anybody."

Nan laughed.

"I'll not tell a soul," she replied.

"Well, then, this is the secret. Little Dorothy, brother's daughter, is going to Buffalo to be educated. Now she has caught the sight of that big, long-haired worshipper of hers, Uncle Bill, declared she shall have the best education the money can secure. And he is going with her, my dear. He and Aunt Dustband and Bruno and the canary and—"

Mollie stopped, completely out of breath.

"Go on, dear—and the cat. Surely auntie will tell you about Tab?"

"No. Tab's mine. Auntie gave her to me. She says it will mean good luck, the dear, generous soul."

"And I know all the rest—at least, I can guess the rest without you saying another word, Mollie. I

has bought Mr. Dustband's business, and—oh, I just know it's so—you are going to live in the cottage."

"You are right, dear, you are right. We will live in the cottage until our own little home is built, which won't be long, for Rob has already spoken to the architect."

"We will miss the Dustbands. We will miss little Dorothy very much," said Nan, sadly.

"Bless you, Nannie, they intend to spend more than half their time here. They will be here all through the summer and part of the winter months. This is still their home, my love."

"And Gaff is going, too," sighed Nan. "His mother is taking him to Buffalo."

"Ah, Nan, you should feel glad for all these things. Think of it. Dear Dorothy's sight restored. Gaffy's mother found. Your wayward, troublesome chum—" Here her voice broke, and she laid her dark head on Nan's shoulder.

"Glad? Love, I am more than glad. I am thankful, so thankful for it all, Mollie. You will understand, dear, that it grieves me to think of having to do without dear faces and voices I have seen and heard and loved so much. Understand me, I am very happy in their happiness, happy in yours. It's just because I'm—I'm blue, dear, that I feel so."

A cold October moon pierced the shaggy edge of a cloud and threw her silvery radiance along the path. And so they passed, with arms about each other's waist, along the leaf-carpeted walk bathed in white glory, slowly and silently, each busy in her own thoughts. At Malcolm's gate Mollie took a little,

wan, tear-stained face between her warm hands and kissed it tenderly, as she said good-night.

Up the path toward her home Nan walked, with bowed head. The big moon was out in all her glory now. Slowly, thoughtfully, the girl passed on, until she came to where a great maple stood shivering in the night wind.

Here she paused, and with a sob that was almost a cry drew down one of the dry, hard branches of the tree and pressed it against her lips.

"Nan," spoke a voice, at the sound of which the blood swept through her in great surges.

She turned quickly, the branch still clutched in her hand.

"You!" she breathed, and swayed as he had seen her sway before. But now his arms received her and held her nervous form close to him. And, looking down, the old moon, who had seen and learned and kept silence, crept reluctantly behind the cloud curtains again.

"I had to come to you, Nan. I could not live without you longer. Tell me, am I welcome?"

"You are welcome, Stray," she whispered, and with a little cry she drew his face over to her own.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE HAPPINESS OF MR. CREATION

THE first of November dawned gray and cold. With the light, as though anxious to intercept it, came heavy clouds that swooped low and threw white snowflakes earthward. The wind sighed and moaned and quaked until the village maples bent their bare heads before its strength. It tore down alley and cast the straw and leaves upward to meet the snowflakes descending. It was not an angry wind. It was merely a happy, playful one out on its morning romp.

So that, when it tore the strip of bunting Mr. Creation was adjusting above his store door from his grasp, and sent it waving and hoisting high in air, Mr. Creation actually caught its contagion and laughed happily. Then he glanced up and down to see if anybody was watching. Nobody was. Nobody seemed to be out yet. It was too early. Then the wind came back again and twined his long, dyed beard about his neck and took his hat, tossing it merrily down street. Then Mr. Creation laughed again, and wondered what it was made him so happy.

He turned to re-enter the store when he discerned a familiar figure coming toward him through the early light.

"Good-morning! Good-morning! You are like the lark, sir, you are up early," called Mr. Shipley, advancing.

"Good-morning, John!" replied Mr. Creation heartily, holding out his hand.

The other took it and returned the shake with interest, gazing wonderingly at Mr. Creation the while.

"John," said Mr. Creation, "two of the best girls that ever lived are going to be married to-day."

Mr. Shipley glanced at him quickly. Was this Mr. Creation speaking, he wondered?

"Yes," he replied. "I'm up for the wedding."

Mr. Shipley glanced uncomfortably at his tattered bespattered trousers. "I came up early so as to buy a suit and some other necessities, that I might be able to enter into the festivities in such attire as such an auspicious occasion demands, Mr. Creation."

"John," said Mr. Creation, taking that gentleman's hand again and shaking it, "John, my dear fellow, come inside."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. And you are feeling better, I hope, sir?" replied Mr. Shipley, fidgeting for his pipe and looking hard at the postmaster.

"John, I'm feeling better to-day than I have for years. I got a letter from my Jim last night. That's why I'm feeling better. He went off in a boat at me six years ago, you remember."

"Yes, sir. I remember the harrowing circumstance," replied Mr. Shipley, seating himself on a barrel convenient to the door. "I remember it well, sir."

"So you do, John. Well, he's coming home to-day and I've been so hungry for him, you know, not eating anybody else—no wife, no other children—I know I've been grouchy and cranky and all that

"I won't be any more. Have a cigar, Jack? Take a handful."

Mr. Creation shoved over a box, and Mr. Shipley took the handful.

"We all have our cranky spells," he observed, meekly. "And, sir, I would thank you if, after I have put these cigars in my pocket, you would allow me to once more shake your hand and wish you godspeed, as it were—or—no—that isn't right—wish you joy and all happiness, sir, in this, the event of a happy re-union between a loving father and a repentant child, who, I know, has never ceased to love you, even though far away from you." Again they shook hands and Mr. Shipley coughed spasmodically. "This asthma is a nasty thing," he said. "Sometimes it affects one organ, sometimes another. Sometimes it's the hearing it affects; to-day it seems to be the optics, aggravated, no doubt, by the cold wind. As I was saying, sir, I am heartily glad for you."

"Come upstairs and see his room, Jack."

Mr. Shipley did as he was asked.

"There you see it, just as he left it, Jack. There's his bed and his belongings, and here, in the closet, are his clothes. He didn't take a dud away with him. Says he in his letter, 'Dad,' says he, 'you might as well give all those clothes of mine away, because I'm too fat for them now,' says he."

"Well, well," said Mr. Shipley. "And he was such a slim chap when he went away."

"Just about your size, John. I should guess, and what I was going to say is this. Here is a bran-new suit he had ordered before he went away. The tailor brought it to me, and I paid for it without a word, and

put it away for Jim. Now Jim's too big for it, what am I going to do with it? I'll bet you can't guess.

"Well, now, sir, I cannot, that is true. You're somewhat too large for it, which is too bad. No, I cannot guess, and if you will allow me my little joke I will say that I must do the same as the sea-sweede who had an argument with his dinner, I must give it up."

"Well, then, I will tell you what I'm going to do with that suit. I'm going to make you put it right on, now. It's yours, John."

Mr. Shipley waved a hand in feeble protest.

"I am already under too great an obligation to you, sir. I must not think of abusing a kindness. You're too generous."

"See here, Jack, it will please Jim if you will take it, and Jim always liked you."

"Yes, he did. That is correct," mused Mr. Shipley thoughtfully, half aloud. "If I really thought it would please Jim—"

"Then it's settled. Now, I'm going down to get my decorating finished, and you just climb into the togs, and I'll let you help me when you come down. Here are collars, ties, shoes, everything, and there's a valise you can put your old clothes in."

For a time after Mr. Creation had descended the stairs, Mr. Shipley sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. Finally he arose and removed his coat and vest.

"Mr. Shipley," he said, aloud, "the Master Mechanic of human nature is not the man who can detect its flaws, but the man who can discern the causes."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE DOUBLE WEDDIN'.

THE people of Talbotville had risen early to prepare the decorations for the momentous event, the "double weddin'."

Oh, the bustle, the hurry, and the joy of it all!

When the old sun, who had been vainly trying for over an hour to find a slit in the heavy cloud through which he might peek, at last discovered one small rent, he laughed so heartily that little Professor Casteel, who was standing on Mr. Dustband's shoulders the better to adjust a bit of bunting, got the full benefit of a bright sunbeam in his eyes, and mistook his thumb-nail for the tack he was driving.

The wind got busy again and drove the clouds in a great helter-skelter, so that soon there was not one cloud in the sky. Then the winds came back, and quieted down, and seemed to nestle about the scene as though, having performed their part, they had a right to share in all the enjoyment of the occasion. And the sun?—why, he laughed all the way along his course, and looked in on shadowed places he had not seen for days, so that the hillsides, the valley and the hearts of the people were bright and free from shadow.

And the lawn at Malcolm's, with its decorations and its long rows of tables, loaded down with every good thing that hungry mortal might desire, and the great

tent of bunting over it all to keep off the wind, making the whole lawn like a big, comfortable dwelling. And the people who came in crowds to witness the quail little wedding ceremony, which took place, for some outlandish reason, under a big, bare maple tree! And the girls, Mollie and Nan—why, you wouldn't have known it was their wedding day at all. They were here, there and everywhere, laughing, chatting and telling passing jokes. They carried no blossoms, save that Nan's throat was pinned a tiny, red-gold maple leaf and from Mollie's dark hair peeked forth a little sprig of homely brown sumach.

Oh, well, it was a very old-fashioned wedding, you know; but, then, please remember, it was a long time ago.

To-day old people speak of the "grand double-wedding" at Malcolm's." Everybody in the village was there—young women and young men, old women and old men, boys and girls, and all the babies in the village.

The event was a garden party, a picnic and a wedding, all combined. It didn't take long to perform the solemn rites, but the feast which followed was long indeed.

The Talbotville Brass Band, with Professor Casteel at its head, played the wedding march after dinner was over and the dishes were being moved away. Mr. Shipley suggested that the band should perform at this juncture, and as he was in a way managing the whole affair, his suggestion was acted upon.

Be it known, however, that Professor Casteel had consented reluctantly to this. The proper time for them to play the wedding march was, so he thought

when the brides-to-be were being conducted to the altar, to wit, the maple. To which argument Mr. Shipley had responded in a manner that could not but convince the most skeptical that his, Mr. Shipley's, plan was by far the better one.

Truly, he was a born master of ceremonies. As a student of human nature, Mr. Shipley has solved many tangled problems—as he thought. One of these was that pleasure following surprise was doubly a pleasure, arguing that surprises awaken the faculties, and that pleasures of any kind are doubly acceptable when those faculties are active. So it was that Professor Casteel acknowledged Mr. Shipley's superior wisdom, and leashed his musicians until such moment as Mr. Shipley should give him the sign.

It is a trying and harrowing strain that a musician who knows he can play and wants to play feels when held in check; and the members of the Talbotville Brass Band felt the strain keenly. Bill, the blacksmith, who played the bass horn, was very nervous indeed. Occasionally he would look toward the woodshed, to which place Mr. Shipley had quietly had the instruments removed, and sigh. Occasionally he would whisper, "Well, by gum!"

Be it known, also, that Mr. Shipley's idea was to have the members of the band collect in said woodshed, and at such time as he deemed expedient sail forth on the assemblage with a burst of sweet music. Accordingly, shortly after dinner was concluded and the musicians were feeling each one a Sousa, they met there.

Nobody ever knew how it happened, but due, no doubt, to nervous strain, Bill, the blacksmith, in moist-

ening the mouth-piece of his instrument, blew forth a note that fairly knocked the panes from the shed window, and nearly gave the whole plan away.

Simon Diggs, who was talking to Mr. Malcolm near the gate, heard the soul-splitting blast, and on account of his defective hearing, misconstrued its meaning.

"That red-headed porter has set my hotel on fire at last, and he's blowin' th' horn for help! Ha! Ha! Everyone come, quick!" he shouted, as he tore down the street toward his house.

At this juncture the band marched forth from the woodshed with a burst of melody, and a panic was averted.

This was the commencement of an entertainment that lasted all afternoon. Speeches were given. Songs and instrumentals were rendered.

Oh, everybody was happy, very happy! Gaff—shall we call him Gaff Linkum now?—yes, we will, although his real name is Wiskins, you know—Gaff Linkum and Buz Fields were here, there and everywhere. And little Dorothy, the old roses back in her cheeks again, now that she had fully recovered from her illness, was with them, her great blue eyes drinking in the scene, a deep wonder in their depths, born of her impotence to understand, sight being still so new, so strange, and so beautiful a thing to her.

Ah, little Dorothy, as we say good-bye to you, let us say that we know God's goodness to you in giving you what you have so long been without was sure in reward for those beautiful thoughts you have had, those beautiful deeds you have done. Good-bye, little Dorothy! We will leave you with the long-haired protector who now bends above you and touches

your sunny hair with his lips. Look into his deep eyes, dear. There rests the story of your life's work.

And to you all, dear people of Talbotville, good wishes from one who knows and loves you. And you laddies, Gaff and Buz, we have followed you a little time through the quiet valleys and the bush-lands. You will traverse those dear walks many a time, we hope, and of all the joys that may be yours, these joys will be the sweetest.

Good-bye, laddies. We know the fields through which you walk. We know those quiet pools beneath the willows. The winding creeks, with their pond-lily beds and brown cat-tails, even the old, flat-bottomed boat, we know. And because your boyhood haunts are not strangers to us, perhaps we may, some day, again meet on the old play-ground.